O Villain, Villain, Smiling

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/37070803.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Francis Dolarhyde
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Medieval, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Knight Will Graham, Noble Hannibal Lecter, Top Will Graham, Medieval Hannibal, Tournament Setting, Swordfighting, Jousting, Biting, Medieval Hannigram, Bottom Hannibal Lecter, Ass Play, Blow Jobs, Blasphemy, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Will Graham Is Learning to Love Hannibal Lecter, Blood and Injury, Period-Typical Homophobia, They Are Cannibal-esque, Mostly historically accurate
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-02-12 Updated: 2022-03-20 Words: 25,673 Chapters: 6/7

O Villain, Villain, Smiling

by canisirae

Summary

Reluctant knight Sir Will Graham has a gratitude problem, a wicked desire he cannot quite unpack, and an obligation to represent his patron nobility in a week-long tournament. After an enthusiastic and unorthodox victory in the first round, this young and recalcitrant vassal catches the attention of someone who seems to offer him exactly what he is afraid to admit he craves. Will, naive and frustrated, accepts.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> I saw a lot of people saying they wanted a medieval Hannigram fic but couldn't find any good ones so I'm stepping up. A lot of the armor & fighting descriptions come from my own experience as a jouster and sword-fighter and I tried to keep this as historically accurate as I could while ensuring it was palatable for a widespread modern audience. Similarly I have had to allow some considerable anachronisms to make this possible (they're gay). There is a glossary of medieval terms in the end notes.
>
> Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a sense of anticipation that came before a planned, non-lethal fight which hung about the shoulders like a mail shirt. On a large field beyond a battered arena and its packed stadium seats, organized in streets of brightly colored herald tents, were knights who paced and swung their swords in aimless practice drills. All were attempting to discharge the tournament anxiety in any way they could. Over the coming days, and under the eyes of the nobility, they were expected to prove their worth as a fighter not only to their own patron but to the noble allies and political enemies alike. This was a solemn responsibility: fighting too poorly could end in shame, or worse, in the jaws of its more vicious twin, ridicule. Chaos bound about the trodden, muddy grounds like a herd of hunting dogs, tugging at the hems of mail shirts and leaping up at helmet plumes.

Mid-way up the field, in the section allocated for respected lords whose titles were earned and not given. . Where the tents got a little smaller and the colors a little less varied, Sir Will Graham stood in perfect, quiet stillness. He had been made a knight after proving himself in some inconceivable manner to his patron, who had himself been awarded his status for service in the name of some greater, faceless power. They were an odd but well-suited pair: Lord Crawford was a tough and calloused man who took himself seriously and worked hard for what he had. Will Graham had never intended to be a knight; only by some incalculable misfortune had he ended up Crawford’s favorite fighter anyway.

Sir Graham, reluctant servant to a man who wanted what was best for him, suffered from an itch that he could not satisfy. It burned in the back of his throat, untouched by coughing and never soothed by any amount of cold drink, tickling like that first human desire to break the rules. Before his knighting he had been a simple trapper, spending his days in the pleasant and predictable solitude of his own company. Will had slept well through the night without dreams. When he had killed a man — and saved a girl’s life — he had done it with surprising ease. It had not been frightening, but it was clumsy. It had earned him his title, his comfortable house on a sizable piece of land. It brought torment and an itch which could not be scratched.

The hastiludes always made the intolerable itch worse, until it sizzled away inside of him like hot coals under his skin. This would mark his seventh year of reluctant participation. There was no pride in being a skilled swordsman, nor a talented rider. The shame of how much he enjoyed the continued victories in each resurfaced annually like a raw wound. Graham would fight under Crawford's heraldry—a dark blue banner, a large gold star, the white falcon—as fealty dictacted. . There were days he dreamed about returning to his old life, hours spent wandering the heath in silent pontification, but he always came when Crawford called. It was some bizarre, sensitive kind of gratitude to which Will Graham was particularly inclined. He would offer no thanks, but he would fulfill what he believed was owed.

He stood almost fully suited for one-on-one combat. Closest to his skin was his shirt and a pair of brown hose left from his modest beginnings, over which he wore a tight-fitting quilted gambeson, once blue but now rather grey. A mail shirt over this, and then a shallow gorget. This piece, which protected his neck, ensured that no dagger could be slipped between the bottom of his helmet and the neck of his cuirass, which went on next. It was rather plainly made, well-fit, and comfortable. From this hung his faulds— Graham did not like the slowness of full armor— and then a pair of high leather boots. His ensemble was completed by a pair of slim pauldrons, a set of narrow bracers, and his thick leather gauntlets, reinforced with plates of steel around the back of the hand and fingers. All that was left was his helmet, which he would put on last.

Internally, Will could not have been farther from the campground. Behind gently closed eyes, breath calm, he was standing on a cliff's edge out on the moors, the wind catching the front of his cloak. The air was clean and cold and thick grey clouds loomed in the distance. He would stand there and watch the storm roll towards him, the light getting dimmer and greener, until he could see the rain coming. Then he would run back down to the village, like he always did, and get inside his house before the lightning hit. He did this often, over and over again like a prayer.

It was upon this cliff, chilled down to the bone, that he seemed to feel the footsteps of his patron rumbling through the earth like far-away thunder.

Will opened his eyes, blue and stormy as the sea, and turned his head tiredly. "Lord Crawford," he remarked flatly.. He did not bow: another discrepancy his lord allowed needlessly and graciously. Still, the stately man in his dark blue doublet raised a cautious eyebrow. "I pray you are saving your liveliness for the field," Lord Crawford stated. It was friendly but honest: he held his reputation in too high regard to allow any knight, let alone his favorite, to embarrass him now.

Will pulled a hand from his glove and wiped it down his face. His palm was damp from being stuck inside his gauntlet, and it would get worse as the fight drew nearer. He was certain there were other knights better, or evenly, suited for this competition as he was, but his lordship insisted with an iron solemnity that Graham was the best. He had never known Crawford to be cruel or even very harsh, but he could see a nervous edge glittering like a hidden knife.

"I'll manage," Will barked, his petulance bordering on the inexcusable. He realized this immediately, looking away and relaxing his posture, evidently embarrassed. If Lord

Crawford was angry, he did not show it. Sir Will Graham offered up as many apologies as he did thanks.

“ *Better* than manage.” A large, heavy hand clapped down on Will’s shoulder, shaking him slightly before the noble turned to leave. “Do not make a fool of my generosity, Sir Graham.”

Will watched his patron retreat, the wide silhouette of his shoulders bobbing above the fast-moving pages who rushed nervously in and out of the tent. Village boys who would look up to men like them their entire lives, only to die nameless peasants in some battle most of these knights would never see. He knew that Crawford himself was a capable fighter, and had been a knight once himself. Crawford knew what the field was like and had worked hard enough to get someone else to represent him in it. Will thought about the cliff and the storm and cleared his throat against the itch that burned there.

He imagined, as he took his sword from an excited, faceless boy and slid his helmet into place, a life of his which did not involve this. He imagined a moderate farm, trapping on his own lands, with some *real* dogs. While he understood their worth as a status symbol, he found the greyhounds aloof and goofy. He could always marry— that would certainly remove him from some of the endless fighting and would make his lordship rather pleased. It would keep him out of danger, too. No one would send you to battle if you were young and freshly married.

A tired sigh: it wasn’t the danger he didn’t like. It was the way that uneasy itch almost disappeared when he held the sword in his hand, when he practiced his drills and imagined the force needed to sink it through a body, watching it fall to the floor. The itch buzzed in his ears like a bee was stuck in his helmet, joining the roaring sound of the crowds and the thunder clap of his heartbeat, getting slower. Sir Graham followed the small page through the tents, up to the edge of the arena. They stood beside each other in silence as they waited for the round ahead to finish. He was standing at the edge of the cliff and the sky was turning blue in front of him.

At the sound of the victory horn, Will approached the entrance to the field, entering after the previous fighter had stumbled stiffly past him. He could hear only the sound of his own breathing, isolated in the echo chamber of the helmet. The buzzing had become so shrill he could hardly hear it anymore, aware of it only in a sharp little headache just above his eye. Sir Graham crossed to the center of the field, shoulder to shoulder with his unseen opponent, and bowed towards the row of faceless lords and barons. Turn, his one-hundred paces back down the field, turn to center. Look at who is going to try to kill you (or at least beat you within an inch of your life).

The other knight bore heraldry Will had never seen before: a heart speared by antlers. It was grotesque, painted in thick red strokes on a golden shield and graven into his left pauldron. The knight — *why did he never listen for names?* — swung a spiked flail like a whip. He was tall and young, stalking across the field with the grace of an animal confident in its kill. A young night of noble birth, who perhaps shows an aptitude for violence, beneath the patronage of an obviously wealthy and foreign noble. It was familiar. It could be lethal.

Will tuned into the sound of his breathing and the thud of his pulse in his throat, waiting until they were matched before he moved. He shouldered his shield and stepped forward,

deliberately planting each foot about 30 paces up his half of the field. His opponent had sized him up in that time: small, slow moving, self-conscious, and judged the threat level from there. He was coming across the field like the angel of death, swinging his flail around in a loop from his right hand. He was not carrying a sword. Will watched him carefully between his breaths, dissecting the man as though his sword had already slid clear through his belly. The other knight was closer still, ten paces away.

He is arrogant because someone has made him arrogant. He is arrogant because he has never lost, and he will fight as though he has nothing to lose. His confidence is what will destroy him.

Will stepped to the side at the last second, relying on the weight of embellished armor and theatrical weapons to continue carrying his opponent down the field past him. He heard the man let out a growl as his flail swung left into the empty air, stumbling and cursing as he ground himself to a stop and turned. They were face to face now and the flail was swinging again, winding up and back for another strike. Graham ducked again, sliding his shield off of his arm in preparation. His opponent was fully armored, and wielding a weapon which would make striking with a sword difficult. Turning sharply, crouched down below the reach of the flail, Will swung out his shield and aimed at the back of his enemy's legs.

The hit landed.

The shield cut into the back of his legs and splintered, knocking the enemy knight off balance and throwing his weapon in his fight to maintain it. Now flat on his back, the splinters of Will Graham's shield laying scattered around him, the knight was scrambling to pull himself back up. His breath came like a roar in his ears, his thunderous pulse cooking up a storm in his mind. He could see nothing and hear even less as he dropped to his knees over an enemy he could not name, grasping blindly to his right for a sharp ribbon of broken wood.

Removing the helmet: dark curls falling free from under his untied cap, mouth held open in a snarl to breathe. Will's hand found a splinter of shield and raised it up over his head, clutching it between two hands and holding it there. It would take so little to bring it down between this stranger's helmet and gorget, or to drive it sideways up beneath his arm. The knight was grabbing at Will, hands struggling to find purchase in the seams of well-fitting armor. It would take *so little.*

A horn blew from the stands somewhere, a white flag raised on the edge of the field. Cheers and expletives alike erupted in the crowd, a chant beginning somewhere behind him that Will could not hear. He jerked himself back to his feet and looked around quickly. He felt like he was on fire, studying the distant and unbelievable faces of the people around him as though in a dream. He could not look down at the other knight, scrambling away from him and storming off out of the field. He had to look everywhere else: the pages, the broken shield at his feet. *Up,* Will reminded himself. Someone handed him his helmet. Sir Will Graham raised it above his head in a show of victory, but his eyes kept moving across the stands.

He was looking, though he did not realize it, for the man who employed the knight he had just defeated. There were faces he recognized seated in a row above banners he was familiar with. Men who clapped politely at his victories and their young wives who smiled nicely at him looked down upon the field like gargoyles on the outside of a church. At the end of the

line, down with the petty nobles, Will's gaze found Crawford. They exchanged a nod. His eyes kept traveling down the line, but they did not have to go far. Seated to Crawford's left, next to the blue banner under which Will fought, was a flag bearing the antler-pierced heart.

The man above the flag looked like a phantom, some devil he'd heard about in a fairy tale, the pale rider heralded at the end of the world. He was dressed sharply, and more expensively, than his counterparts in glorious scarlet velvet and gold silk. He had a thin face like the devil himself, with high, other-worldly cheekbones and cunning, dark eyes which were looking right back at Will. The man bore an inscrutable expression, his head tilted slightly to the side, as he clapped politely. For some reason it sent a primitive terror through the young champion which pierced him through like a knife.

Sir Will Graham turned and rushed from the ring, suddenly feeling as though the eye of God Himself was aimed down at him, scrutinizing his every move. He needed desperately to get out of this armor, a twitch forming beneath all the layers that begged for his skin to breathe. A trail of squires followed him, catching gauntlets and tabards as he stripped them off his body and dropped them into expectant hands.

Will was certain one of them spoke to him but he didn't hear it. He stood and let them undress him from his armor, stacking it neatly on a low bench within the dark and comfortable canvas tent. One of the boys presented him a bowl of cold water and a cloth; Will splashed it over his face carelessly, felt a wandering droplet travel down his throat and along his torso, raising goosebumps along its path.

I was ready to kill that man for nothing.

This thought appeared unbidden. Will pressed the palm of his hand between his eyes as if he could cast this realization out by hand. *I should have killed that man.* He splashed himself again, gasping, horrified.

"You fought quite beautifully out there."

Will had a tongue that sometimes moved faster than his mind. This was one such occasion, when he replied quickly, "not much of a feat when my opponent is a tactless brute." He stiffened immediately after and turned his head towards the door of the tent, body angled away, sweat-soaked gambeson flapping open over an unlaced shirt. He had not heard the voice before but knew, somehow, who it belonged to. Silk, eel-slippery and cold as the grave.

If the stranger was waiting for an apology, he waited in vain.

"Yet it was not my brute who cast aside his weapon to attack instead with his shield, regarded by few as a killing tool. A bear in a cage is placid while there are bars, but a beast when the door is unlocked." The strange lord smiled pleasantly, without teeth, clutching his hands politely behind his back as he stepped all the way into the tent. Will turned around, faced him, glared at him through dark eyelashes.

"I am no caged animal," he spat, staring down at his hands, fiddling with a loose grommet on his gambeson. The accusation incensed him, but why? There was no lie disguised there. Crawford demanded Graham fight, so he was fighting, as obedient as a dog afraid of the

boot. Tomorrow another round of fighting, then the first joust, another day of fighting, the final joust, and the banquet. When did tournaments become so arduous? He was quickly growing tired of lords, he realized. Will waited for the disgust and shame to come. It didn't.

"No," chuckled the stranger. "Not for much longer."

Will would have retorted, stepped across the room and demanded an introduction or an explanation, but was mercifully and graciously spared by the arrival of Lord Crawford. *Speak not of the devil or risk summoning him.* He bowed upon Crawford's immediate entrance; right hand tucked up against his belly as his foot swept backward.

"My Lord," he said quickly, eyes on the floor.

"Sir Graham," Lord Crawford boomed. He looked from his vassal to the noble who joined them there. Crawford paused, bowing politely. "Lord Lecter, what a pleasant surprise. My vassal fights excellently, does he not? I hope your own knight was not too humiliated by the swiftness of the battle."

Lord Lecter, who had been watching Will with a bemused neutrality, smiled again, inclining his head slightly. Will felt sick watching him. The practiced poise and perfect grace were eerie and almost unnatural: sickly feminine but balanced with a dangerous, arrogant masculinity. It felt like he was looking at a devil only he could recognize.

"On the contrary," Lecter replied, turning to face his fellow noble. It was as though Will had been excused from the room, immediately swept out of anyone's consideration. He had become invisible— what an incredibly bizarre man! Who was he to provoke such emotion in Will, anyway? He had half a mind to say something, but grit his jaw and stood by in silence.

"I was rather impressed with Sir Graham. I came to offer my enthusiastic congratulations and my eager anticipation for what he brings next." His voice, soft and coaxing; a snake urging a woman towards an apple. It possessed the gentleness of a mother and the severity of a knife.

Will worked his jaw and looked dutifully ahead, focusing on a small hole in the wall of the tent which let in a javelin of late afternoon sunlight. In truth, this admission thrilled him inexplicably. How could a few words of praise surmount the years-long assurances of his own liege lord?

He heard Lord Crawford answer with an amicable, "a victory, I pray," and a polite chuckle from the chilling Lord Lecter. He could not make his way back to the cliff, but was making a point to drown them out anyway. After a time in which the nobility discussed things Sir Graham cared little about, he was aware of a pause in the conversation.

There were two sets of eyes on him, looking at him both with warmth and approval. Will did not look at Lord Crawford, but met the eyes of the stranger with surprising ease. Lecter tilted his head to the side, a curious animal, and smiled to reveal a line of flat, sharp teeth that glittered like porcelain. The look on his face was strange; enamored, hungry. "His as much as yours, I hope," he replied lightly, casting Will a knowing, conspiratorial look before excusing himself expertly and leaving the tent.

It felt as though he swept the air out with him.

For the first time in recent memory, Will Graham’s itch was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I have the whole plot of this story-boarded out and it should be between 6-9 chapters. I'll try to update this as often as I can but I *will* finish it.

YE OLDE MEDIEVAL GLOSSARY:
herald - the system by which coat of arms are described and regulated. individual symbols and colors which are used to denote a specific (especially noble) person. these things would be seen on shields, flags, banners, paintings, etc.

hastiludes — medieval & early modern tournaments which involved non-lethal combat for entertainment and political gain. these would include one-on-one fighting, melee fighting, jousting, and sometimes archery. these were a chance for various nobles to show off the skill of their knights. synonym for 'tournament'.

gambeson - this is a quilted protective garment worn under armor and over clothes. often they are made in two pieces: sleeves which tie around the chest like a very short jacket, and a long vest with a high collar.

gorget - piece of armor used to guard the neck and throat.

cuirass - the part of armor which covers the torso. sometimes called a chestplate.

faulds - almost like a skirt which guards the waist and hips.

pauldrons - shoulder armor.

bracers - forearm armor.

page- a male assistant for an older knight typically between the ages of 7 and 15.

spiked flail - a medieval weapon which consists of a pole-handle and a length of chain, at the end of which is attached a steel or iron ball fitted with spikes.

petty nobles - these are lower-class nobility, and may include those who received their titles as honorifics as opposed to those who are noble-born and recieved their titles at birth.

vassal - an elite fighter / bodyguard in service of a lord in exchange for land-holdings, called 'fiefs'.

Thank you of course to my friends and Beta readers for making sure I don't sound too insane.

The title of this fic is taken from a line in Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From a bedroom on the second floor of his large, half-timbered home, Will Graham could look out for miles over the rolling fields owned by his patron lord. The wheat was high, rippling like a sea, rushing like waves in the night wind over the gentle hills. If he let his eyes unfocus, as he did now, the light of the moon reflecting off of the golden grain became a cottage way out on the horizon. It was small, made with cobblestone walls and a thatched roof with a small chimney. The lights were on all night like a pair of yellow eyes out in the dark. He wished he could live there, on some remote little outpost away from everyone else. On some nights Will would stare absently out until his perspective shifted, until the house way out in the gloom was *this* one. When he looked back at the dark little fief from inside his imaginary cottage, Will could feel a spear of sadness slide through him like a spike of ice.

It was late summer, just weeks away from August, and the night air would stay tolerably warm for about a month longer. The tournament field was some miles away and there were hours yet before he was expected to wake. Still, with the house's heavy silence settling eerily around him, Will made the decision to leave earlier than sensible for the tournament and walk there on foot. He took up a candelabra from a desk at the back of room and wandered, ghost-like, down towards the staff exit at the back of the kitchen, passing a mirror in the ground floor hall as he made his way through.

Sir Will Graham paused to regard himself, the candlelight casting heavy, dramatic shadows across his face. He looked worn and gaunt, his hair an unruly nest of curls sticking up childishly and gathering in ringlets at the back of his neck. A draft crept in through a nearby open window, licking at the candles. They sputtered weakly in complaint and, with a sigh, blinked out. A deep and heavy darkness settled around him, broken only by a sliver of the moon entering through the window. Will felt suddenly alone in the shafts of sickly white moonlight, overwhelmed with unease at his own appearance. He looked like some tormented spirit, cursed to wander these halls for all eternity. The candelabra was abandoned hastily on a side table, his footsteps quick on the flagstone floors as he rushed through the house towards the back door. *I must get out,* Will thought desperately, and knew he did not only mean from the house.

He thought of the previous day, of the unfamiliar comfort he found in the violence and the unsettling Lord Lecter, whose voice drifted lazily around in his mind like a melody he could not quite recall. Panic rose in his stomach like a wave. Will passed through the kitchen, still and dark for another hour at least, and stumbled blindly over a bag of flour left out on the floor. His hands fumbled in the gloom for the door latch, pulling it open like the stone of a tomb and rushing out into the brisk summer night.

The moon was high and full above the fields, glittering at the center of a tapestry embellished with thousands of stars. A wind whispered through the trees, slithering its way through the wheat fields which rose up on either side of the winding dirt road. The pungent scent of the

roses wafted damply over to him from the back garden, drawn out by the fresh dew. Will was entirely surrounded by quiet, his mind immediately comforted by the feeling that he was the only man in the world. An owl cooed quietly at him. He sighed heavily, relief flooding out some of the fear in his heart.

At the south end of the back garden, following the narrow dirt footpath from the staff door and past the raised beds of medicinal herbs and cooking spices, was a low stone wall broken by a gate which squealed whenever someone tried to open it. Will avoided this, not wanting to wake anyone who slept nearby, and jumped lithely over the stone fence. He cast a final glance at the house, noting vaguely how much easier he could breathe out here, and set off down the road, following ruts carved into the hard-packed ground by thousands of wagon wheels.

I came to offer my enthusiastic congratulations and my eager anticipation.

Will kicked at a pebble and watched it skitter off the road. His thoughts had circled back to the one thing he was not eager to think about, and yet he indulged the memories with a guilty sense of gluttony.

He had been in no mood for civility when he returned home from the games the evening prior. Lord Crawford, ever gracious, had presented Will with an open invitation to dine amongst the noble's esteemed family. Will had quickly turned him down.

East of his house and following this same road in the opposite direction was a corner of his estate which cut across a small and unimportant river. There, where the road slid away to dense clover wrapped around the foot of an old and somewhat sad-looking willow tree, someone long before Will had erected a stone bench. It called to him briefly as he trudged up the road but Will kept walking. Not now. Not tonight. He needed to move.

When he had first moved here, his meager possessions barely filling a single room in his new home, he spent a great deal of time seated beneath the fringe of that willow, watching her slender fingers trail timidly through the water. He used it as a hiding place in the early days, though he was pained to admit it, and tried his best to avoid the people filling his house. Servants, pages, cooks— all under the pay and ultimate command of Lord Crawford. Will still had not adjusted to the freedom they allowed him, the empty hours of his days no longer filled with hunting, cooking, or cleaning, nor had he shaken the feeling that they were there to spy on him.

The notion that he should have left a note for the cook that morning, announcing he would be out for his morning meal, drifted lamely across his mind. Will dismissed it and kept walking, ears tuned to the distant sound of the rushing water: it was too late to do anything about that now.

Guilt washed weakly over him again. His struggle to gracefully accept the aid and gifts which came with his elevated status, even petty as it was, became more apparent as the years wore on. Crawford had neglected to send him new armor and had halved the serfs responsible for Will's well-being in the second year. There was a point after a visit from Lady Crawford in which a gardener started appearing to tend the roses growing wildly across the back of the house, though no official announcement of his employment had ever been made to Will.

Graham was able to live comfortably on the earnings from the sheep grazed on his fief by local shepherds and provided a hefty profit for the noble lord. He was an easy tenant, eager to please and hard-working, who was more comfortable in his quiet, humble life than other knights from similar backgrounds. Crawford complained of this type often: how they ate beyond their means and partied beyond their status.

“Don’t let yourself get too comfortable, Graham,” Crawford had boomed at a banquet one night. Will recalled the lord had been rather drunk, and little else— drink seemed the singular vice which Will himself could not easily resist.

He rubbed at his shoulder, burning feverishly under his shirt. There would be rain later: the old wound always ached before a storm. The field would be soft and slick for the joust tomorrow, dangerous conditions for men who had spent the past two days beating each other in combat barely safer than a full-blown war. A shiver raced its way down his spine like a bad omen. Someone would die; some horse would slip and snap its leg in the muck. The ghost of experience glittered like a premonition: after being disqualified from the hand-to-hand fighting, disgraced knights pushed themselves harder on the tilt. It was a last hurrah, a final chance to redeem themselves and win *something* in the name of glory.

Glory.

Will snorted, shaking his head up at the night sky.

What glory was there to be found on a simulated battlefield? Whose life was he saving? Whose kingdom was he protecting? Which village child would be allowed to grow up with a farm and a family because Will Graham and every other vassal in the kingdom came to blows for entertainment? He had become a knight through an honorable action, but there was little honor in what he was doing now.

I am not a caged animal, he had declared defiantly. Adrenaline and fear had made him brazen and an over-confident liar. The cage was large and gilded but it trapped him just the same: wandering the shadowy corners of his estate in neurotic avoidance of his servants, who waited only for secret orders from their mutual master. Will did not travel, he did not socialize, he simply waited in his home for commands the way a warhorse anticipated the eventual bit.

No, not for much longer.

Will groaned. Oh he wished he could strangle that man! Let his fist strike like a serpent and land somewhere upon that smug, regal face. The audacity to be correct, and know it despite Will’s denial, and the bold, inhuman way Lord Lecter had regarded the young knight in the first place! Will felt like a specimen in a jar, a prize piece of livestock paraded at the auction. He felt, with a shudder, how he imagined the corpus might feel as its blank wooden eyes stared down at devout believers week after week.

A knot formed in his stomach which mutated quickly into nausea. If he had eaten more than a stale heel of bread the night before he would have been sick on the roadside. Will kept his eyes on the sky, pinning them along the edge of the night. Down where the sky met the wall of trees along the horizon it had begun to shift colors: the indigo of the deep night giving way

to the soft purple hues of early morning. Will paused to catch his breath, pressing his hands firmly into his belly.

Today there would be more fighting. At least three rounds, all of which he had to win. His stomach growled eagerly at the thought of the fight: advancing into the subsequent rounds would reveal less civility and more brute violence. The itch in Will's throat was unbearable, finding the urge to stick his hand in his throat and scratch difficult to dispel. There was a recollection which stalked back and forth like a wolf, too, reminding him how ready he was to kill Lord Lecter's knight in the first round. A third thought, less pleasant than the others, bobbed to the surface of his mind like an ill-hidden corpse. *Lord Lecter had stopped the nagging scratch.*

He arrived at the edge of the tournament camp as the dawn roared from pink to scarlet, orange clouds streaked like scratches across a red sky. Will frowned, dodging a scruffy dog running away from an equally scruffy child. How many of these other knights could sense the rain? Some of them were beginning to wake, wandering stiffly from their tents in search of a secluded place to piss off last night's drink. Many of them had traveled days to compete here and had no better lodgings. Where did their noble shadows stay, Will wondered? They were certainly not sleeping in tents amongst peasants and warriors. This was a simulated battle, after all. Meant to be comfortable for those lucky enough to avoid the fighting and thrilling for those who would never ride into danger.

His own camp was sleepy and closed up, the tent flaps tied tightly shut. At one side of the heraldry tent was an equally sized, plain pavilion in which the squires and grooms would sleep for the week. On the other was an open-walled canopy that covered a table. Will had not dined here yet and doubted he would, wondering vaguely who had put it there as he untied the entrance to the herald tent and went quietly inside.

The floor was open, revealing trodden, wilted grass. Along one wall was a low bench loaded with stacks of equipment: armor, polished and waiting for a new fight, shields eager to be broken, a crate of lance tips designed to shatter. There were barrels of drink and large wheels of hard cheese. Against the other wall, atop a table covered by a plain cloth, lay the weapons. Polished swords, a thin dagger, the head to a polearm. Will sucked his teeth and rocked his jaw back and forth, tracing his fingers along the flat edge of a sword.

Will closed his eyes and stepped deeper into his mind, watching the walls of his cottage on the horizon jump up around him. The quiet, dark room, barely decorated, and the world waking up outside it.

Walking out of the dim little cobblestone cottage and out onto the grey scrub, Will raised his face to the brilliant sky. He could get a good walk in, go his favorite route as slowly as he pleased, before the storm arrived today. There was another hour before the pages would wake, and another hour after that before Lord Crawford made his way to the grounds. It was only after all the nobles had gathered that the order of the fights would be announced.

With a relieved sigh and a tired smile, Will took off down the path through the heath. A herd of deer bound over the wild grass, their white tails flashing like lightning in the air as their smooth copper legs carried them quickly away. He watched the stag in the center of the group

with his antlers like a chandelier, and thought of the heraldry of Lord Lecter. The deer quickly disappeared beyond the edge of the hill and Will continued walking.

He came to a fork in the path which ran westward up a hill in one direction and out towards a crop field in the other. Will took the first path, heading upward towards the cliffs that looked down at the village. He could see his hall house from there, and the big pink blossoms of his mysterious gardener's roses.

"Oh, I'm sorry sir! I didn't expect you so early."

It was a young boy standing in the opening of the tent, blinking early morning sunlight out of his eyes. Will smiled at him. "Worry not," he assured him. "I snuck in to let you sleep." He wracked his mind for the boy's name, sure that he had been introduced once…

"Shall I fetch you breakfast, sir?" His little hands were balled into the fists of the drowsy, scrubbing at his eye with the knuckle of his left hand. M…Ah, yes.

"Yes, Michael, please."

Michael, thrilled to be addressed so personally, rushed off with a heavy wooden bucket in his hands. There was a well at the south-west corner of the tournament field, giving Will a few more moments of privacy. He considered retreating into his thoughts again, searching for the last traces of tranquility before a stressful day of fighting rolled into chaos.

His shoulders sagged with a heavy, weary exhale. Will wasn't hungry but needed to eat if he was to fight today. There was no time to wander around in the peaceful wild of his mind now. He withdrew a knife from a belt pouch and carved himself a wedge of hard cheese, ripping the end of a loaf of bread which had gone slightly stale, thinking little of the task he had given the page. Despite deciding only hours earlier that he would not eat at the table outside his tent, the temptation of the warm golden sunlight was revealed to be irresistible.

Will sat with his face turned up towards the sun, catching the translucent tips of his long dark eyelashes and heating his cheeks like a blush. The sounds of life exploded around him: men shouting orders at one another, children laughing and scurrying between tents and the legs of soldiers with youthful speed. There were dogs that barked at everything and high-stepping horses snorting along the wide, main paths. Armor jingled and motivated, young fighters struck steel together in the practice fields, hoping to drill out any mistakes before the big fight.

"Good morning, Sir Graham. It is a relief to see you are not burdened by nerves."

A heavy swallow of a dry breakfast. Will cracked open an eye tiredly.

"Lord Lecter. You're here early."

The noble offered another coy smile. He was infuriatingly unshakeable. "You have peculiar manners for a vassal, Sir Graham," he remarked, tilting his head to the side once more. Will watched him carefully, as though his meticulous consideration of this man's every action would reveal some secret that could satisfy his curiosity.

“There are some behaviors reserved for the nobly born,” the knight replied stiffly, setting his meager meal down on the table beside him. Lord Lecter’s eyes tracked the movement, following Will’s hands for a hungry second before they moved back up to his face.

It was unsettling in a deep and instinctual way which felt animal and alien to Will. He watched the fine, manicured hands of the older man as he laced his fingers in front of his body, his posture upright and royally rigid: a mark of good breeding and fine training. Today he was dressed in darker colors than the day prior, wearing a wine-colored doublet over a pair of dark brown hose.

“I like to rise before the sun. After the death of my father early in my life I spent a great deal of time amongst his prized fighters and beloved knights. I have always felt slightly jealous of the brotherhood formed between warriors. All killers, trained to annihilate each other, gathered here in this field in a powerful show of discipline. Attacking on command but not lethally. Like hunting dogs eager for the scent but forbidden from the catch. There is a thrill in places like this, charged with anticipation.”

Will snorted. “Brotherhood,” he repeated, rolling his eyes as he got to his feet. He stood several inches shorter than the foreign noble, something he had miraculously failed to notice before. Insecurity boiled under him. “You must excuse me, my lord, for I have a busy morning if I am expected to survive your little… show of *discipline.”*

Lecter looked at him with the same private smile, like he was laughing inwardly at a joke he had no intention of sharing, and bowed his head. When Will pushed past him, checking him roughly in the shoulder, the noble did not complain. He smiled politely to the evacuated space and cast a last, lingering look at the sad breakfast left out in the sun.

“Fight fiercely today, Sir Graham. The cage is getting weaker.”

Will, obstinate and anxious, ignored the noble’s plea as he threw the tent flap shut behind him. His heart was racing in his chest and he was *desperate* to figure out why. He could feel the heavy presence of Lecter lingering outside like a boil forming against his spine, chilled to the bone by a man who seemed completely out of time and place. There was something ancient and omnipotent about him, accentuated by his unusual, sophisticated beauty and strange manner of speaking. It seemed that this lord was aware of something horribly important which Will had not discovered yet. There was a fire growing under his skin that made him squirm but, and Will realized this with horror as the air was shoved from his lungs, his scratching desire was gone.

Coated in a sheen of nervous sweat unusual for the rather cool morning, Will shot from the tent again and nearly knocked over young Michael with the pail of water, ignoring it guiltily as it splashed all over him. His head swiveled as he searched up and down the lane, expecting to see the retreating noble somewhere off in the distance. Lecter was nowhere to be seen.

“You look panicked, Sir Graham.”

Damn him!

Will turned sharply toward the sound of the voice and the table to his left. “Can you fight?” He demanded rudely, crossing his arms over his chest.

Lecter regarded him coolly. He was as composed and perfect as a saint, the mid-morning sun turning his grey-brown hair into a halo. It curled softly where he had tucked it behind his ear. Will swallowed around the lump in his throat and turned his eyes to the ground.

“There are a hundred men here notorious for their skills with a blade,” the noble cooed, rising to his feet. Again Will was made aware of their height discrepancy. He grit his teeth. “While I am flattered beyond words at this offer, Sir Graham, I’m afraid I prefer to wield my weapons in private. Now *you* must excuse me, I have yet to place my bets with my social companions. ” He placed his thumb under Will’s chin and, gentle as a mother, raised his face until he had nowhere else to look.

Clenching his jaw, Will met Lecter’s gaze with a bitter scowl.

The noble smiled, pretty as the grave. “Do not make a waste of my fortune, Will.”

Michael, dripping but unfazed, joined Will as they watched the strange foreigner depart, walking casually down the camp aisle until he was swallowed by the brilliant eastern light, dissolving in the sun like an angel.

Chapter End Notes

Not much happened in this chapter and I realized this while writing it. Part of the delay between updates is that I wanted to be able to upload chapters 2 & 3 at the same time so you would have something exciting to read.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains themes of religious and internalized homophobia.
If you struggle with religious trauma surrounding sexuality, please proceed gently.
There is some smut towards the end. :)

Will. Uttered like a thirteenth commandment.

The blue-eyed knight was swallowing down a crisis he could not afford to have.

He did not believe he was worthy of such strange, theistic devotion, though the thick, syrupy feeling of immense satisfaction turned in his belly like an eel. While loath to admit it, there was a perverse kind of pleasure in this bizarre new relationship, founded on an unspoken curiosity. Will looked down at his hands, turned them palms up, and imagined that he could see right through them. He felt sick.

“Sir, it’s time to suit up,” this was one of the squires, ruddy and nervous looking. Will flashed him a permissive look and turned back down to his hands, wetting his bottom lip.

Confusion burned into anger at the back of his tongue.

Yes, a fight would be good, a chance to displace the energy that sizzled away inside of him. He was panicked, afraid that this tickling beneath his naval meant something inconceivable. Will was *not* persuaded that way— he had remained unmarried this long because he believed himself to be fundamentally unfriendly and solitary. He had declined all invitations to dine with Crawford and the rest of his knights because of this foundational truth. It had *nothing* to do with some carnal and wicked desire for— *no!* The less he thought about it, the better. He needed to fight, to become an animal on the field.

As soon as he was able, Will Graham burst into the tournament arena with his sword already drawn. His opponent, representing some weakly-bred hereditary baron who was hated by most of his contemporaries, flourished his sword dramatically. It flipped through the air in impressive theatrical tricks. He had short brown hair and a rabbit painted on his shoulder, and he smiled roguishly at the pretty young ladies who batted their eyelashes at him from their seats.

Will cast a glance to the stands, eyes skipping over the heraldry hanging from them. He ignored the women, focused on his opponent, and noticed that Lord Lecter’s seat was empty. His stomach turned. He turned back to the knight opposite him, who had taken Will’s momentary distraction to rush dangerously close with his sword raised. A disinterested blink and Will threw up his weapon, setting his shoulders and putting both hands on the grip. The

force of the parried strike shook through him and down into the ground as the brilliant light of a beautiful morning made way for dull gray skies. *Focus, Will, focus.*

He snarled and pulled his sword sharply down and to the left, guiding the enemy weapon to his side as he turned his body, right arm pressed up against his opponent. Will released his right hand and swung out his elbow, sending the rabbit knight stumbling away. He wanted to look at the stands, convincing himself it was to ensure that Lord Crawford looked entertained. O God! Will was falling away from a light he didn't even really believe in. Lecter wanted Will to fight like an animal, but Will, stubborn as a mule, did not want to please him. As Will raised his sword and charged forward, his opponent leapt in from the side and landed a blow across the face with the pommel of his sword.

There was a sickening crack and the taste of blood coming quickly in his mouth.

In order to see through the dim light and screen of misty rain, the two competitors had removed their helmets. The water which now ran down Will's forehead diluted the blood until it dripped down his chin like a beard. When he raised his face, slugging himself out of the mud, it looked as though he had been feasting face-first from a corpse.

A murmur of shock shot through the crowd.

The force of the blow had sent Will— and his sword— backward across the field. He had managed to catch himself on his hands and knees, but apart from a dagger sheathed at his belt, mostly ornamental, Sir Will Graham was now unarmed. He imagined Lord Crawford, leaning forward in anxious anticipation, and saw the dark eyes of the devilish Lord Lecter blink in his mind. Unable to stand the thought of being disqualified in the first round, Will drew this dagger and threw himself across the field towards the rabbit knight like an animal.

He lifted his dagger above his head like a spike, lunging forward with a roar to drive it down at his enemy's face. The other knight yelped and threw up his sword to block Will's savage advance at the last second in a panicked, desperate motion. His pupils had shrunk down into pin pricks, fear shaking his breath. It took the full force of his bodyweight shoving out towards Will to knock him off, the rabbit knight swinging his sword furiously and recklessly. His motive was clear: this was now a fight for his life. Will dodged each thrust casually: left, down, right, up, right, left.

Lord Lecter's hands, folded carefully across his belly, the plaintive expression on his face and the quiet, improper amusement that darted across his face every time Will said something out of line. Will felt insane: tormented by maddening visions sent by some plague festering in his blood or perhaps the devil. He could do little to shake these furtive, impure thoughts from his mind, and they were beginning to affect his ability to perform.

A thrust from the rabbit knight landed, blade tip slipping in the side opening of his cuirass and pressing his chainmail down into his skin. The force was agonizing: knocking the wind out of Will. He stumbled backwards, landing with a grunt in the mud. The rain was beating down on him now, stinging his broken nose where it hammered against his face. *No. Don't lose now. The door to the cage is open. Get out.* So he couldn't shake the thoughts— he would have to lean into them, take the anger and channel it outward. He needed to fight like it was Lecter he was supposed to be killing.

Will launched himself back to his feet, sucking air through his teeth as the pain of a broken rib settled down inside him. He gripped the dagger, leather handle slippery in his muddy fingers, and circled the rabbit knight. A chance for them both to catch their breath. Will watched the young man raise his sword and swing it. Time seemed to slow, pausing halfway between the swing of a pendulum. He could see the fear in the knight's face, he could see the desperation to incapacitate Will before he could do real harm. He could see a sort of righteous, holy terror that was triggered by realizations too deep for a simple fighter to understand. Time was about to return to its normal speed. He had to act.

The pendulum swung. As the blade of the sword passed in front of Will's face, dodged with seconds to spare, Will reached forward and seized the wrist of the other knight just behind the pommel of his sword. He wasn't thinking anymore, blissfully void of any inner commentary for the first time in recent memory. His body seemed to move on its own, following some routine memorized thousands of years ago and stored sleepily under his skin. Will was on fire, it was spilling out of him, he was a wolf waiting low in the scrubby, wild grass finally able to leap out at his quarry.

His teeth sank down into the wrist of the rabbit knight, hard enough that the sharp taste of someone else's blood became all that Will was aware of. It was hot and thick, marmalade warmed over a fire, it was washing over his teeth and dripping down the back of his tongue. He felt like he had been filled with some kind of divine light, as though all things were suddenly becoming clear and obvious to him. The desire that scratched in his throat was satisfied, it was clear and three-dimensional and it was tilting its head at him like a bird. Smiling at him with his mouth closed. Gently placing its fingers beneath his chin. Will hardly heard the young man scream, though he knew he must have, and was barely aware of the flash of white flag that signified the end of the battle.

The only things he could think about were the taste of someone else's blood, the tenderness of the raw flesh of another man, and how Sir Will Graham wished it had been a different man entirely. He ached, not about the face or the rib where he had been beaten, but somewhere more alarmingly *private.* The raging, terrifying erection was the only thing which prevented the blood loss from knocking him into unconsciousness.

The stimuli came back slowly and one-by-one. The shrill sound of a frenzied horn, the shriek of a man in pain, the noise of a crowd in an uproar. Will saw people coming towards him, nobles, doctors, and guards, and let go of the rabbit knight. He abandoned his sword in the dirt, wiping blood from his nose with the back of his hand, and fled the arena as quickly as he could. His heart hammered in his chest, a church bell antagonizing him from the inside out. Will was being pursued by demons.

He felt like he couldn't breathe. He couldn't get his armor off. Will's hands were covered in mud and blood, dirt shoved deep under his fingernails. They trembled pathetically. He could not seem to get a good enough grip on the leather straps to pull any of them loose. Will moved blindly through the tournament grounds, avoiding the places he was likely to be found, and did not know when to stop walking. Would he be allowed to keep fighting? Would they arrest him? He had won, but at what cost?

The knight's arm had been softer than Will expected. The flesh had given way as easily as steak at dinner, it had been warm and wet. He spit a mouthful of blood out into the grass, scrubbing at his mouth with the dirty cuff of his gambeson. Will had never been much of a believer in God but he wished he was now, wished that he could remember a single line from any prayer which might absolve him of the madness he was feeling. *The cage is open. The beast is out.*

Unsure of where else to go, Will began to wander blindly back towards his own home, towards the bend in the river with the willow tree. The rain was choking him. He was slugging up onto the cliff looking out over the village and lightning cracked down close to the houses. They were dangerously close to being set ablaze. He had been hiking with a body strapped to a board across his back, bearing this burden uphill like the mule which pulled the cross. As he reached the crest of the cliff, Will stopped to untie the thick straps and loosen his grim responsibility. The corpse which gazed vacantly back at him was his own, glassy-eyed and martyred. Will attended to it thus.

Grasping himself under the arms, Will pulled his body up to a scarecrow pole sunk into the soft earth. He didn't know who put it there and couldn't recall doing it himself, but knew that it was designated for this purpose. He tied his hands up and wrapped the thick rope around his chest, double-knotting everything to ensure the corpse did not fall down. It was less regal than Jesus, he thought stupidly, watching as the wind whipped his dark hair across his still, pale face. There were warm hands reaching out, touching his jaw, cradling his face between two palms and looking at it carefully.

Will blinked. He was not standing out on the moors beside his own dead body. There was a thunderstorm, low black clouds swallowing up the sky and rain that stung when it hit the skin. The threads of the willow tree rushed through the air like whips and behind him the river had been churned into a brutal froth. He had wandered blindly to his hiding place: the stone bench beneath the willow tree, and he was not alone. There was a dark horse grazing anxiously, her ears swiveling left and right to listen to the storm. As his surroundings came into focus so did the identity of the person cradling his face: it was Lord Lecter, and the two of them were soaking wet.

He smiled warmly at Will, who smiled back with blood in his teeth.

"The beast is out of the cage," Lord Lecter said devotionally, "and you have broken your nose."

All Will could feel as he pulled his hands away was the cold wet air rushing in to meet his cheeks. He felt like he was burning, a sore and throbbing pain radiating out from the center of his face. His thoughts felt unreachable, as though he was floating alone in a sea of thick fog. The numbness was worse than the fury; the relief was less bearable than the agonizing pain. Who was this man to deserve such softness? To deserve such power over him?

"You seem to have an unusual soft spot for me, Lord Lecter." Will reached up and prodded gingerly at his nose, wincing with a hiss at the tenderness. Deflection, as though the appreciation he felt for Lord Leter was somehow more forgivable, something not worth mentioning. Will focused on the pain in his face to stave off another embarrassing erection, and stared pointedly at the ground.

“Hannibal.” A quick correction.

Will raised his eyes slowly, blinking droplets of water off of his eyelashes. He felt cold, soaked all the way down to his bones. The chill filled him so entirely he felt stiff and uncoordinated, but he wasn’t sure it was caused by the rain. He met the noble’s gaze and fell into it: tumbling down into the deep darkness of a well. It seemed as though Will was *seen,* he was known and understood here in this glade, the storm thrashing the branches of the trees and tormenting the river. Amidst the chaos Will felt like he could see clearly all at once, standing in a field beneath a cloudless, flat sky.

“You seem to have an unusual soft spot for me, Hannibal,” he repeated. A thrill ran across his shoulders. He shook it away. The pain in his nose became an anchor, pulling him back into himself every time he began to drift away and into the arms of the man opposite him.

Hannibal inclined his head. Even acknowledging him with such intimacy sent a dagger of anxiety through Will’s chest. “I have few such passions: my curiosity towards you is among my curiosities towards God and Death.”

Another chill before his face flushed. He choked up a wet cough, spitting up half-clotted blood dripping down from inside his sinuses. The violence was escalating in the battles and Will was escalating with it. He had nearly killed his enemy with the shield the day before and today attacked with his teeth. There had been little proof of the grace and tact he was known for as he fought these men like a monster. A beast. Something wild and untamed by noble lords and glory.

“I thought you were going to kill him,” Hannibal said, rising to his feet from a crouch. He extended a hand to Will, who took it immediately. Hauntingly, Hannibal sounded pleased by this. Will was ashamed by how he reveled in this: how the admission felt as though he had been stroked along his spine like a cat.

So did I, Will thought sullenly, pulling himself up to his feet. He looked past Hannibal at the looming hall house slightly uphill from them. The thatch was dark from the rain, ominous and heavy beneath the oppressive dark clouds. There was a sudden crack as the swift fingers of lightning flashed across the sky, followed quickly by rumbling thunder. Will could feel it in the ground. The safe thing would be to go inside. He had attacked a man with his teeth like an animal. Will could not bring himself to return to the house he felt he did not deserve.

“The tournament will be suspended for the storm,” he commented off-handedly, clearing his throat. His armor felt too heavy to bear. Reaching up to try to unbuckle his pauldrons revealed that his hands were shaking, they had become pruned and unwieldy from hours in the cold rain.

“Yes,” Hannibal was moving, turning back towards the house and heading up the path. “Lord Crawford is defending your ability to fight as we speak. He is claiming that the strike which broke your nose might have been lethal, if you were not so lucky.”

Will followed him obediently, blindly, lost and in need of direction. He had questions which seemed impossible to answer and unthinkable to ask. He was lost in a stormy sea on a little boat, and the fog was so thick and the rain so loud that he could not find the lighthouse. He

might have been miles from any coast and sailing further out. There had never been so many unexplainable unknowns.

Another lightning flash, touching down on the edge of the forest on the horizon. They got inside and found that the house was warm and dark, the shutters closed against the wind. Candles had been set where they could, but the red light and long shadows had given the place a strange, dream-like appearance. With all the confidence of a man who grew up with attentive servants, Hannibal sprung into action. He ordered that his horse be brought in from the stables. He asked that a scrawny girl from the kitchen have food prepared for her master Sir Graham. He asked that wool blankets be brought up, that a change of clothes be found for him, damn the quality. Will stared blankly at a support beam in the wall and swayed on his feet.

Hannibal turned to him. “I’d like to attend to your injuries,” he said, a pause, then “if you will let me. I became a physician in Italy.” He was infuriatingly delicate with his language, said so casually and with just enough concern that it felt humble. *An Italian physician.*

“Fine,” Will barked, choking on a laugh. Better this man, who touched him so often already and whom he was so desperate to touch, than someone Will had never met before. He felt his heart skip again at this willing confession. They went up the stairs to the second floor and into the dressing room next to Will’s private bedroom. His heard raced. Will, rocking unsteadily, allowed this near-stranger to dissemble his armor and unbuckle the fickle straps of his gambeson. He allowed himself to revel in the intimacy.

A deep breath— the first in what felt like hours.

“Sit down, Will,” Hannibal urged as he drew a heavy chair up to the roaring fire.

Will, so reverently. As Will Graham sank down into the plush armchair, warmed by the golden flames he felt the hairs on his arms rise. There was a strange little prickle forming around his belly button that he squirmed away with a painful cough. He wished Lord Crawford was here, now, breaking up the privacy of their isolation in his house. So close to the bedroom. Will thought about the pain.

Hannibal knelt beside him, balancing a bowl of warm water on the arm of the chair. He dipped a clean linen cloth in, wrung it out, and lifted it towards Will’s face. His free hand pressed gently into Will’s chin, guiding his face downward and closer to him. The tenderness of this gesture was foreign to Will— he was not used to being handled so carefully, with so much consideration and pride. While he longed to lean into it, he would never allow himself to, and stiffened sorely up the spine in a pathetic show of determined masculinity.

“Will, I’m not going to bite you,” Hannibal muttered flippantly. He wiped the blood from Will’s face, which throbbed dully but consistently. As Hannibal pressed the washcloth down against his nose Will’s vision faltered, the room spinning. He hissed, pulling away, pressing back into Hannibal’s fingers against the back of his neck. Hannibal was holding him firmly in place, stabilizing him.

Hannibal dropped the cloth into the water. Silence crept into the space around them, Will watching out of the corner of his eye as Hannibal waited patiently for him to compose

himself. He felt suddenly embarrassed: like a child drawing out a temper tantrum a few minutes too long. It was likely that this was one-sided, that his bizarre and unholy attraction to this man was something he suffered with alone. After all, it was *deeply* unnatural. Hannibal was normal. A noble of fine breeding. He wasn't damned or wicked, not really.

"When they let you back into the fight,"

"If," Will interrupted, crossing his arms gingerly across his chest.

"When they let you back into the fight," Hannibal repeated, unperturbed by the rudeness, "You are going to have a very important choice to make. This is the only chance you have to seize your freedom, your independence, an opportunity to get away from all this forever. Lord Crawford will be expecting you to fight fairly, carefully and frightened, after the events of today."

He paused, wringing out the cloth. "Let me look at your rib," Hannibal demanded.

Will pulled his shirt up over his head, raising his arm with a grimace. "You don't want me to fight fairly," he mused, staring deeply into the fire. His voice was flat and distant. "You want me to be worse." A long silence followed. Will pulled in a breath, hoping fiendishly beyond the realm of reality that the pause meant something.

Hannibal busied himself with the inspection of Will's side, his breath skimming across the pale flesh covering Will's ribs and sending gooseflesh radiating out from the bruise. It was so warm, so close. Will's entire torso was bared to him, all the way down to the old scars that littered his body.

"Joust fairly," Hannibal answered instead, avoiding Will's sour implications, "and do whatever it takes to get into the final round." There was love in his voice, talking to a prized racehorse in hopes that a little gentle encouragement would improve its performance. It sounded like he was praying. *God,* Hannibal seemed to say, *drive this man to kill in my honor, so I might have him completely.* Will felt mad again, finding words where there were none.

Hannibal stepped away, clucking his tongue disapprovingly. Will kept looking into the fire, afraid that if he looked anywhere else he might lose control of himself. His right hand, which gripped the arm of the chair, was white-knuckled. Consciousness was slipping out of his fingers like a desperate fish as the blood rushed southward from his head.

"Lord Crawford does not appreciate you for your whole self," Hannibal said at last, drifting slowly towards the door until the shadows at the edge of the room consumed him. Will listened to him getting farther away, heard the *thunk* of the washbowl placed back on the dresser. He would let him go, desperate for some time in private.

"Not like you do," Will replied with dry sarcasm.

Hannibal continued without skipping a beat. "You deserve to be sworn in fealty to someone who understands your unique needs. A smaller home where you may be allowed to isolate yourself. Access to the violence you so naturally crave, which satisfies the unbearable desires burning away inside of you." He placed his hand on the doorknob, half-turned it.

“I will stay downstairs in the main room until Lord Crawford returns. Try to rest.”

Will hardly heard him leave above the sound of his heartbeat, pounding away at a level which could rival the thunder. Was Hannibal offering Will a new contract? An oath to defend him in some foreign country, where he could kill and maim and be left alone? Another flash of lightning, filling the room with eerie white light, before thunder which shook the floor. Staring into the fire, searching for answers in the flames, Will’s cheeks burned hotter than the coals as he replayed the day in his mind.

The broken nose, the bite, the taste of that man in his mouth. The lost time, Hannibal’s hands on his face, the gentle authority in guiding him here. Hannibal’s hands on his face. The gentle way the older noble spoke to him, as kind as Will spoke to his horses. The bite, the taste of blood on his tongue. Hannibal’s hand on the back of his neck. Lord Hannibal Lecter. Hannibal. Hannibal, Hannibal, *Hannibal.* Will looked furtively around the room, ensuring that he was alone, and pressed the heel of his hand down over his groin with an embarrassed groan.

Someone who understands your unique needs, which satisfied the unbearable desires burning away inside of you. Sir Will Graham racked his brain for a single, whole prayer to offer up in hopes of saving himself, even insignificantly, from eternal damnation. None came to mind, an entire childhood of good Catholic attendance, service every Sunday, and *nothing* . Still seated in the arm chair, and *still* thinking about the aftermath of his fight, Will slipped his hand beneath the waistband of his pants.

His cock felt heavy in his hand, already stiff and nearly painfully hard. It did not help his faintness as he stroked it, rolling his thumb across the head of his dick. Will tried to think about women, about the soft rosy flesh of their breasts, the curves of their waists, their delicate fingers and necks. What he succeeded in thinking about, head tilted back and narrow throat exposed to the golden firelight as he exhaled a fluttering breath, was Lord Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal had soft, strong hands which distinguished him as a man of elevated rank and high pride. He was uncalloused, as working that hard was unnecessary for him, but strong and lean. Unlike many men of his age and status he had not let himself go soft. His palms had been so warm and gentle against Will’s face, his eyes so genuinely concerned when he assessed Will’s broken nose beneath the willow tree.

Will’s cock jumped in his fist. *Fuck.*

He stroked himself furiously, toes curled down into a fine Persian carpet brought back to this dreary country by some forgotten Crusader. His cock was so hard it ached, drawing the blood down away from his head to press up against his belly in erotic agony. Will felt as though he weighed nothing, as though the room was spinning and rocking like a ship caught in a storm. His mind raced and his heart thudded painfully against the inside of his ribs. He couldn’t stop, not now, not while the horror of his actions felt meaningless, not when he was so *fucking close.*

Those dark, all-knowing eyes, the cat-like curve of his mouth when he offered all those coy, little smiles. The constant urging towards violence, towards some kind of freedom offered

behind closed doors. Hannibal seemed to know these desires well, too well for someone who had never experienced them.

Had Hannibal ever fought in war? What did it look like when he killed people? Will tried to picture it: sword slipping through flesh like a carving knife, blood soaking his hands and tinting his grey-brown hair. He could see it vividly flecked across Hannibal's face, watching him come across the battlefield, gripping his hair and tilting his fine, regal head back and ripping his throat out.

Will Graham came on a shuddering breath, quiet and horrified.

He gathered himself and stood stiffly, looking to the dark bedroom, the walls beginning to spin around him. As Will limped across the parlor, dropping his shirt on the chair behind him, a prayer came back to him suddenly:

Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners

Now and at the hour of our death.

Not that it would do much good for him now.

Laying on his back in his big, empty bed, with his nose broken and the start of a black eye pressing on his sinuses, Will Graham was certain that he had just damned himself to Hell. He didn't feel badly about it, never much of a believer, but he was frightened. There was an acknowledgement he knew to be true but was afraid to say.

Pray for us sinners.

Sir Will Graham wanted to fuck Lord Hannibal Lecter. His cock stirred again lazily, but Will covered it with the heavy blankets and fell into the sleep of the sore and spent. He was unable to think much about anything right now. His breath came shallow and peacefully, deep unconsciousness rushing up to him. For the first night in a long time, Will did not dream.

Now and at the hour of our death.

Chapter 4

The morning of the joust, two days after the incident which broke his nose, Will Graham was in church. The sun came up over the medieval chapel, a modest single room with a little steeple, and revealed that he was kneeling in the pews alone. Large stained glass windows cast rainbows over the floor, superimposing the image of the Corpus Christi across the stones. Will had his hands clasped piously together, placed on the pew ahead of him, his head bowed reverently. It wasn't out of a particular need for redemption or prompted by any specific feeling of guilt: Will was trying to pray because he didn't know what else to do.

He had slept soundly that night and woke late the next morning. Hannibal— *Hannibal*— a name which still knocked the breath from his lungs, was gone when Will rose and wandered through the house in search of breakfast. Lord Crawford had come later that day, explaining jovially before the backdrop of a perfect summer morning that Will's admission to the tournament had not been contested. He snapped his fingers at a servant for something to drink in celebration, watching Will uncertainly out of the corner of his eye.

Crawford's inspection continued after a long and thoughtful drink from his stein. "Italian physicians," he scoffed, rolling his eyes dramatically with a wave of his hand. Will wondered absently how ugly he looked, having missed a mirror.

"I respect that man a great deal, Will, which is why I sent him after you in my stead." Crawford set the mug down on the table so loudly Will's vision jerked. He pressed a careful finger to his temple, attempting at discretion. Everything ached, with any mention of Hannibal at the center of it.

Will had spent the remainder of that day resting, pacing in his room, groping himself behind his bed curtains. He felt like a teenager again: desperate and out of control. Hannibal had not visited him nor inquired after his well being. It was a new, deeply infuriating brand of frustration to lust after something you did not want and long painfully for in its absence. Now that the wall of apprehension had fallen in his mind, Will was free to tumble down into the pit of frenzied obsession, diving willingly as though into water. For hours he had stared at the window, not out of it, and recalled what Hannibal had said.

Somewhere you can be appreciated.

The knight groaned and released his hands, crossing himself as he pulled himself back up to his feet. Will was swollen, sore, and anxious. His left eye was bruised shut and his face looked uncanny and misshapen. Despite his rather horrific appearance he didn't feel too terrible: an arnica balm given to him by his cook had alleviated a great deal of the swelling and bruising. He stilled, waiting for the room to stop spinning around him, clutching the back of the wooden pew tightly, before heading for the door.

Morning light hit him like a cannon blast as he staggered out of the church, fumbling along the drive for the hitching post. He could hear the sound of horses and moved in that direction, blinking tears out of his eyes as his fragile sight adjusted to the daylight.

“Good morning, Sir Graham.”

Will froze where he stood, one foot thrown precariously in his stirrup, as panic ran down his back like an egg cracked over his head. It was not him, not *Hannibal* — he did not allow himself time to posit whether that was the revelation he wanted. It was just the priest, looking up at him with a warm, friendly smile. Did the voice of God tell this father Will’s deep and horrible secret? Did the priest look up at him with a feeling gnawing away in his gut? He swallowed heavily, feigning nonchalance.

“Good morning,” Will replied, disinterested. He swung up onto his horse, who pinned her ears and clacked her teeth for no reason other than that she could. He offered her a pat on the neck and a stroke over the withers, adjusting his feet comfortably in the stirrups. She was wearing all her bardings; the heraldry of Lord Crawford emblazoned over her rump. It was important to seem enthusiastic, to excite Lord Crawford’s tenants.

“Praying for the tournament?” asked the priest.

“Just that I don’t die today,” Will muttered sullenly, then bowed his head politely. “Father,” he said, a dismissal, and pulled his mare around to the road. They trotted as fast as Will could handle posting along the lane, turning from the church onto the main road and passing by farmers with their oxen-carts. The harvest was coming soon.

Children bounced along in the back of the wagon and waved at Will as he passed, toothless smiles beaming up at him as though he had done nothing wrong. They didn’t know that he fondled himself to completion to fantasies of men and murder. They didn’t know that he had enjoyed the sensation of biting that rabbit knight. Stiffly he raised his arm and waved at them. Will’s mare pinned her ears at the cows, who flicked their ears and continued along unfazed.

The wheel of the year just kept turning whether he was participating in it or not. Farmers, who could not afford to watch tournaments for days on end, continued tending to their crops and their animals. Children ran wild, begging for money whenever they could, and watched the fighting because it was exciting to them. These were kids who would never be knights and never fight in a tournament like this of their own. They lived a peaceful, uncomplicated life which inspired a cruel amount of jealousy. None of them knew what was happening between Lord Hannibal Lecter and Sir Will Graham.

Neither, Will reminded himself, did the aforementioned Lord Hannibal Lecter. His overactive imagination has propelled this fantasy of his so far into the future that Will forgot Hannibal had not been a willing participant. He was strange, but friendly, and there was little else to prove that he had the same thoughts about Will as the knight did about Hannibal.

Will sighed tiredly.

He told himself, as he arrived at the tournament field and laced his mare through the network of tents so familiar to him now, that he would not participate in another tournament. The senseless violence for no real gain was ruining him— wearing him down. He told himself in a separate, more private, thought that perhaps he would never have to: maybe Hannibal meant what he said about taking Will away from here. Away from Lord Crawford, away from the fief and its oversized house. Away from the heath he wandered in his half-dream world.

The knights he passed all looked at him nervously.

Good, thought Will devilishly. They would be more afraid of killing him now that they knew he was willing to subvert common rules in order to pull a win, and that he had defenses good enough to rid him of any fault. He dismounted, handed the reins to a squire, and looked around expectantly. No Hannibal.

“Looking for someone, sir?” asked the boy helpfully, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Will turned to look at him, eyes wide. “No,” he said, too quickly. The squire was just looking to help, hoping that Will would take pity on him and offer him a real, more permanent position. “No, just letting the dizziness pass,” he repeated, more gently this time. The boy nodded obediently, understanding when he was dismissed, and led the horse off to be suited up for the joust. Will watched them go with a heaviness settling in the pit of his stomach.

He ducked inside the herald tent and saw that a new suit of armor was laid out for him on a dark red rug. Will looked up, finding Lord Crawford standing expectantly across the room from him. While usually so critically aware of his grace and humility, Will shook his head.

“That’s bad luck,” he said sourly, turning away from the new armor to slide his arm stiffly into his familiar and well-worn gambeson. Every movement caused a wince to flash across his face. Lord Crawford didn’t seem to notice them. *Hannibal would have* , Will thought smugly. He no longer felt guilty that he was ignoring Lord Crawford, who declared loudly:

“This is a gift, Will.” The use of the knight’s first name did not seem as deeply, impactfully personal as it had only days before coming from a different mouth. Will scowled.

“Send my thanks, and beg for the understanding of my most generous benefactors. I won’t be wearing it. I cannot risk my life, my lord.” He turned, half-dressed, and bowed painfully for effect. Will did not see the benefit in overt callousness now, not when things were becoming so *interesting* . It was almost sad, to slip back into pretending that his state of mind had not been irrevocably changed, and act like he was happy to be here but reluctant to cause any harm.

Crawford helplessly stood by as Will’s squire, or rather Crawford’s squire, strapped Will into his old and dirty armor. “I am sure,” Will began, pausing to allow the cuirass to be lowered carefully over his head, “I am sure that H—”

Quick as a whip: Crawford’s incredulously raised eyebrow. Less got by him than Will had assumed in his early days of service. Normally he had an easier time choosing his words to avoid suspicion. Will swallowed heavily and continued, “I am sure that *he* would be more grateful to have me alive than dead in his gift-armor.”

“Yes, well,” Crawford was saying, wiping his hands nervously on the front of his doublet. “Yours is not the only reputation at risk of damage for reckless and unorthodox fighting.” He inclined his head stiffly, a gentleman’s goodbye, and swept from the tent.

Will frowned. Was he really willing to sacrifice Crawford’s raport which he had already dedicated so much of his life to defending? Crawford’s title was an honor, and it could be

revoked quickly for any discretion the crown, or higher nobility, saw fit. This was entering incredibly delicate political territory. Will decided, as the squire handed him his clean and polished helmet, that he didn't care. Crawford could write him off in a thousand ways when he had finished the tournament: exile, stripping of his rank, sending him away to serve under another lord. Will was only a piece in a much bigger puzzle that was shaping up to have little to do with Lord Crawford.

"Sir," the squire squeaked. His voice squeaked on the edge of puberty. "We have been watching your opponent, sir, knowing that you couldn't practice and would be handicapped by the bruise, sir." He spoke quickly and quietly, embarrassed to be taking up space.

Will allowed the silence to stretch between them. He waited, rather patiently, for the boy to gather the courage to continue. He offered him an encouraging smile. "'S called 'The Dragon', sir. Fights beneath his own flag, sir. And while we was—"

The boy paused, weighing the decision to involve his friends. "While we was watching him, sir, we saw that posh old weirdo watching him, too." He exhaled quickly: the relief of the absolved washing over him.

"Lord Lecter?" Will asked, running his thumb along a seam in his helmet. *What was he doing there?* A shiver crept over him despite the late summer heat and his many layers of thick clothing. Will wasn't sure why, but he felt suddenly queasy. He knew it was not from his injuries.

A nod from the squire confirmed this sighting and his stomach soured further. Will thanked the boy and reached out a hand for him to shake.

He would find out what was going on soon enough: a trumpet sounded distantly and the very attentive young man rushed Will quickly out of the tent. They helped him onto his horse, as mounting was stiff and difficult when armored, and marched in a grim-faced troop down to the arena. It had been plowed and turned since Will was there last, raked smooth for the horses. The young boys which held his extra shields and lance tips gave him enthusiastic thumbs up.

Will lowered his visor and walked his horse to the end of the tilt, accepting a shield on his left shoulder and shifting his weight deeply into the saddle. The other knight, this Red Dragon, loaded in at the other end of the field. All that separated them was a thin rope decorated with little pennants bearing the sponsoring heraldry. Disaster leaped out at Will from all sides, stalking like a fox along the rails.

The Red Dragon, aptly named, rode in on a large black horse with a thick, crested neck and a mane that brushed its hocks. It lifted its knees, flashy even without a set of beautiful and expensive bardings, though it was decorated spectacularly. The Dragon, fighting under his own banner, wore a glittering set of elaborate and showy armor, complete with a long, exotic red plume drifting from the top of his helmet. Will swallowed heavily, breathing deeply and more calmly than he wanted to, as the Moderator climbed the podium at the end of the ring.

His commands echoed inside Will's mind, calling out in a every voice Will had ever heard:

Receive your lances—

A lance, raised with some effort by the scrawny squire, was placed firmly in Will's hand. As was habit, and good practice, he balanced the heel of the lance over the toe of his boot. His mare raised an anxious foot: she had never lost a match and viewed Will as her less committed partner. While her good training and solemn personality forbid her from doing anything rude, Will could feel her anticipation coiling beneath him like a spring.

At the ready—

Will lifted the lance, leaning the weight of it against his thigh. The balance of his seat changed, he checked the reins one last time before he dropped them to hold his shield. Across the field, the Dragon's horse had begun to froth around his bit. Will's breaths fell into the space between his heartbeats again, his good eye singularly focusing on the space about 20 meters down the tilt where the two knights would collide.

Charge!

He hardly had to touch her before his mare, with her keen, mean ears listening carefully, shot into action like an arrow loose from its string. She stretched out in one enormous stride as Will raised his lance and leveled it over her ears, tucking the heavy counterweight beneath his arm. A second stride and he was lowering the lance, too focused on incalculable increments of time to see much of his enemy. He sank down as far as he could into the seat of his saddle and leaned back to anticipate the impact.

Will had finished a single exhale in the time it took for the two riders to meet. The Dragon's lance was well placed, but overzealous in the estimate of the size of Will's little mare. It checked the edge of his shield and ripped back his left shoulder, eliciting an involuntary yelp. Will's lance, aimed lower than ideal, struck squarely into the bottom right of the Dragon's shield and knocked against his cuirass. In this case, though the point would go to him, Will was worse off: he was already nursing a broken rib and a swollen eye on the left side. The jolt to his shoulder made his vision go white as his mare, saint-like, carried him to the far end of the field.

His squires rushed forward, checking his shield and replacing his lance. One of them handed him a heavy water skin; Will threw up his visor and drank greedily from it, water rushing down his chin. Everything hurt and the sun had warmed his armor until it was almost too hot to touch.

"Go higher and farther left," one of the squires murmured, taking back the water skin. "He's got a big horse, and he rides wide." The boys nodded solemnly at this declaration from their counsel and they left together in a group, rushing back to the outskirts of the field to whisper more strategy. Will did not deserve them, these bored village boys, who knew the tilt as well — if not better— than he did. The Dragon kept his horse at some distance from the center tape, while Will rode his mare closer to it. He had managed to overlook this observation.

Will slammed his visor down and turned his mare into the opposite lane. Was Hannibal watching? Did he notice that Will was not wearing the new set of armor? Will flushed, timidly ashamed of himself, grateful for the umpteenth time in his life that his face was

covered by a helmet. The Dragon slammed a steel-covered hand against his chestplate in a show of bravado. At the command of the Moderator, Will took up his lance and charged. This time, with one pass under their belts, the two knights were more confident in the placement of their lances as they raced down the arena towards each other.

The Dragon's lance met its mark completely, shattering Will's shield into a thousand tiny splinters and planting itself right in the center of his chest. Will braced himself for the blow, expecting a hit like this, and squeezed his legs against the belly of his mare, thrusting his hips back so the force of impact would not throw him backwards out of the saddle. He barely had time to consider where his own lance was placed, the Dragon had come down the tilt so quickly, but was thrilled beyond measure to see the Dragon wobbling off his horse in the opposite direction. Maybe God was looking out for him, after all. He snorted.

Will had been incredibly lucky, hitting him where he had not expected. He attributed this not to God, but to his rusty old armor, weak in some spots and dented garishly in others. Accepting the water skin, Will emptied it completely, his tongue searching greedily for any last drop, and wiped the sweat off of his brow with an equally clammy hand. The squires were gathered tightly around him, sponging off the horse beneath her bardings, offering her a bucket of water which was lifted by some great effort between two boys.

"God is looking out for you, Sir Graham!" One of them chirped, smiling without his front teeth. His companion matched him: missing only one tooth on the bottom. A pang shot through Will's chest— was God really smiling on him because he could handle himself in the ring? God had nothing to do with it. If God was just, and Will did not think such an entity would be, He would give this knighthood to someone who deserved it. Maybe, being even more generous, to anyone who wanted it.

Whatever it was: God, fate, a lucky streak— it was about to run out for Will Graham.

He entered the tilt for their final round with the easy confidence of someone who had secured his win. Several well placed blows and unseating the Dragon once had given Will a comfortable lead. He didn't have to keep track of the points when he finished each round surrounded by the enthusiastic chatter of boys who had little else to do *but* keep track of the score.

The Dragon's lance hit him in the throat and the peace of his thoughts shattered like a mirror dropped.

All the air in Will's lungs was forced out with a wretched sound as his body was yanked backwards out of the saddle, flying through the air beneath the weight of 100 pounds of polished steel. He landed flat on his back, gasping for air and certain he had broken something, watching helplessly through the narrow sight of his visor as the Dragon dismounted and approached Will, drawing the sword sheathed at his side.

Will glanced to his corner as best as he could, saw the cheering faces of his pages turn to horror. He turned and threw up an arm just in time, the beveled edge of his enemy's sword landing squarely against Will's bracer with a frightening *clang!*

It took three of the king's guards, serving as safety for the event, to peel the roaring Dragon off of Will. His enemy had pulled off his fancy helmet to reveal a mouth full of nasty, sharp, jagged teeth that snarled and spit as he yelled. Threats about the end of the world, about divine justice, and about death filled Will's ears until they echoed like thunderclaps. He scrambled back on his ass, pulled himself to his feet, and managed to remove his helmet before he rushed from the ring to safety. He gasped for air, struggling to fill his lungs, and wandered in the direction of his tent hoping that the squires would follow him.

A glance up at the stands: Lord Lecter's place was empty.

Will turned and vomited up his breakfast, his eyes burning.

His head was beginning to pound and the sunlight, streaming into his working eye, brought him close to tears. The ache in his rib had connected to the pain radiating across his chest, shoulder, and belly. As the squires removed his gambeson, Will was too stiff to do it himself, dark bruises were already blooming like roses beneath the thin material of his shirt. The boys looked at him with reverence: *real* injuries on a *real* knight. Will felt faint again.

Someone, unseen in the post-match frenzy, handed him a flagon of wine brandy. Will felt like a wanderer coming upon the anticipated oasis: he drank until the cup was empty and promptly downed the second filling. Tipsiness swirled in his head with the stars and the dull, throbbing pain. Lord Crawford entered and clapped him on the back, sending a jolt of sharp ache shooting up his spine and into the back of his head. Will distantly heard Crawford say something about "a single point". He thought about Hannibal, how the fight had not been mentioned until he had first assessed Will's face. The unexpected tenderness was making him soft already.

Where was he? Not in the tent. No, Will could see everyone in the tent, even vaguely, and knew that the ominous presence of the foreign noble was not among them. The room was getting smaller, the breathing of the people around him getting louder and louder until the walls of the tent rose and fell as though it were a living thing gasping for air. Will couldn't stay here. The tent got smaller still, until he couldn't stay inside it any longer.

Will rushed out into the afternoon sun and started off down the paths between the tents, moving with the confused determination of the delirious. He didn't know where he was going, but knew that he was searching for somewhere away from the noise. This one fact guided him, steering him past the charitable questions and concerned faces. The confusion caused by his injuries, especially the blow to his nose, was coming down around him all at once. Will wanted to be back near the river, under the willow tree. He wanted to be back in hand-to-hand combat, tearing his way through an endless sea of enemies until all of him was red. His bewilderment was so intense, the tents all blending together, the corners becoming indistinguishable, that when Will burst out at the north end of the field and spotted a shady copse of birch trees he wandered blindly to it, throwing himself down in the soft earth with an exhausted groan.

A gentle breeze tickled through the leaves, gathering its speed as it traveled over the busy field and rushed into the woods behind him. Will leaned back against a skinny tree, closing his eyes, listening to the beating of his heart. The nearest tent was meters away, the babble of

competitors a distant gurgle, little more than part of the natural landscape. Before he realized it had happened, the knight had fallen asleep.

When Will opened his eyes the sky had started to shift into its early evening colors: the blue softening into lavender, orange fluttering teasingly along the horizon. Hours had passed since he had finished his match and no one had come looking for him. He blinked, entire body inflamed and sore, and realized with sinking, black dread that he was not alone.

Standing before him in his plain clothes, a long dagger held out at his side and wearing an expression between fury and wrath, was the Great Red Dragon.

Standing behind the Great Red Dragon, remarkably undressed in only an open shirt and pants, bare-handed and glowering, was Lord Hannibal Lecter.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> TW: this chapter includes graphic descriptions of violence and bodily injury. I will include a non-triggering summary in the end notes for those who wish to follow the story without engaging in this chapter. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sir Will Graham was allowed a brief moment of wholehearted elation, the satisfaction of being discovered by Hannibal overruling the initial, and more important, panic which should have set in immediately in the face of this kind of danger. That half-second of unadulterated observation was not wasted: Will's eyes drinking in Hannibal's thick and muscular forearms, the shape of his shoulders and the wiry hair growing on his broad chest. He looked powerful and dangerous, murder glittering in his dark eyes, like some death god risen from the depths of Hell. Will thought Hannibal had been quite striking when dressed fully and masterfully, but to behold him in such a wild, undone state was almost unbearable. It was frightening, it was exciting, it felt like he had been waiting for this moment forever. His heart skipped, stomach twisting into nervous flutters as reality collapsed his rapture: this blissful, nearly pastoral atmosphere was not meant to last.

The Dragon was still here, still watching Will hungrily, wetting his lips and hissing out a low, foul threat. He had been studying his quarry even as Will's gaze drifted past him, to Hannibal, as if the Dragon was not there. This monster was not one to appreciate indifference. His face mutating into a grotesque scowl, the Dragon followed Will's eyes and looked over his shoulder, chuckling as he turned fully to face Hannibal. It was a chilling sound, like nails being scraped over hard stones. As though the lid of a heavy stone coffin had been pushed aside by the corpse which lay within it. He let out a tutting sound, pitying and almost disappointed, and flipped his knife gracefully in his hand, catching it by its carved bone handle as casually as signing his name.

Hannibal watched it, his face bored and unmoved, and raised his eyes to meet the Dragon's. A possessive sort of pride welled suddenly in Will as he looked on feebly. Hannibal's stability, his unshakeable cool, had been one of the things Will had immediately liked about him. The Dragon did not seem to share the sentiment, raising his knife like a baton in Hannibal's direction.

"This concerns you not, my lord," he growled.

"Rather ungracious to kill your contemporary," Hannibal quipped, his face restored to its graceful, icy diplomacy. His eyes flitted sideways, over the Dragon's shoulder, and caught Will's gaze. He held it for a beat and a thousand understandings raced between them.

I won't let him kill you.

I know.

Will you help me kill him?

Yes.

Will drew in a sharp breath.

Hannibal blinked and looked back at the Dragon, his face unchanged. Will was amazed, glad that the Dragon was paying such close attention to Hannibal. It felt as though the blood in his veins had turned to ice, like it had been exchanged for brackish, February river water. The gravity of the situation was dawning on him all at once, that he had been running down this path for days now and he was finally reaching the finish line. Will had never considered himself a coward, and he had killed someone before. What was different now?

Pleasure.

Choice.

"Sir Graham is of little consequence to Me," the Dragon snorted, his thumb rubbing circles on the grip of his knife. Will wondered if this was evidence of anxiety or barely contained anticipation, if the Dragon was as willing to kill and attack Hannibal as he was to eviscerate Will. He swallowed nervously, drowning in the sound of his own heartbeat, and pulled himself stiffly to his feet. As the bark of the tree scraped up his back Will was returned to reality, the stillness of the air becoming suffocating. The distant sounds of chatter, horses, and ringing of steel as quiet as though he had imagined them.

"With his death Glory becomes Mine alone. The gates will open and the Dragon will see His path to domination realized. There will be little stopping the Revelation now."

Will caught himself holding his breath as Hannibal responded, tilting his head to the side, his expression completely mild. It was like watching a pool of water, smooth as glass. "I cannot allow you to kill Will Graham," he stated, and though his tone was level his voice had changed, dropping like a warning growl before the dog bites. A pebble dropped into the pond, ripples getting larger and larger until it was a hurricane wave.

"Then I shall have to kill you first, Lord Lecter," the Dragon tutted, almost genuinely remorseful. Will remembered what the squire boys had told him earlier about Hannibal watching the Dragon practice. He wondered if they'd spoken, what Hannibal had said, why the Dragon seemed so genuinely saddened to kill him. Jealousy boiled up from Will's feet, already stepping forward away from the tree as the Dragon laughed and lunged forward with the knife.

Time stopped, grinding to a halt as the sharp blade of the dagger plunged into Hannibal's stomach, just above his hip. There was no sound, the action distant and inhuman, like Will was watching it happen in a dream. He felt his stomach drop, watched as Hannibal met the Dragon's eyes and shoved him away, the knife pushed back with him. The blood came as

slowly as ink dropped on a page, fanning out through the linen fibers of Hannibal's shirt. The disbelief froze Will where he stood, hollowing him out, emptying the air from his lungs and the pain from his mind.

Every sensation crashed down on him at once as Hannibal fell, collapsing gracefully onto one knee before tipping backwards onto his hips. Will watched keenly at the blood which bubbled from between Hannibal's fingers, covering the wound, and swallowed the spit generated by a watering mouth. He licked his lips, shook through the ringing in his ears, and found that he was free to move how he needed. The ringing, dizzy and distant, made the world look brighter, like the sun had gone white and Biblical. His body felt as nimble and able as ever—maybe his praying had worked.

Suddenly renewed, Will leaped into action all at once, like a dog unleashed on the scent of a hare, and flung himself at the Dragon with a grunt, catching him across the shoulders. Will grabbed him around the neck, putting his elbow beneath the Dragon's chin, and yanked backward with as much force as he could, using the weight of the bigger, stronger man to his advantage. The Dragon tripped backwards, swiping across his body at Will's ribs, his strangled gurgling overpowering almost any other sound. He threw the knife back over his shoulder and Will dodged the blow by a hair's width, feeling the air move around the fast moving strike.

He wanted to get him to the ground, where he could wrestle the knife out of the Dragon's hand, but the other knight was taller than Will, and desperate to keep his life. The Dragon thrust the knife backwards again and Will, who had been momentarily distracted by the sight of Hannibal watching him, met the steel of the blade face on. He turned, saw the glint, and was met with the choking sensation of hot, iron blood before the pain came. The dagger had entered the front of his cheek, sliding along the outside of his teeth until it pierced the soft, gummy tissue at the back of his mouth.

The pain came quickly afterwards, lightning fast and white-hot, shooting up behind his eye and down his neck. Will groaned, his grip on the Dragon relaxed as he fell away, his right hand tightly grasping the knife handle. He closed his eyes, squeezing them shut as tightly as he could, and drew in a deep breath. On his exhale, Will pulled out the knife, hissing as the tissue ripped on the way out. Like a dam had broken, the blood followed it, bubbling out and dripping hot and thick down his face.

Falling to his hands and knees in the grass, Will discovered that he was unable to open his mouth, the injury to the inside of his face causing damage he wasn't prepared for. As he wrenched it open and spit out the blood which continued to choke him, he raised his eyes to the fight, the edges of his vision going painfully bright. Ringing started on one side of his head but not the other. He shook it off.

Hannibal had pulled himself back to his feet and was grappling with the Dragon in a wrestling move. He looked like an angel, the sunset bruising the sky in vivid, awe-inspiring colors behind him. Will had to move fast, gripping the slick bone-handle of the dagger in a fist slippery with blood. He scrambled to his feet, tearing up clods of turf as he rushed across the field towards Hannibal and the Dragon. Hannibal managed to flip the dragon as Will approached. Without thinking, as though someone else was using his hands, Will Graham

plunged the Dragon into the belly of the great red beast and watched him crumble to his knees.

The flesh gave way with little resistance. Will was shocked, for a moment, how truly indistinguishable it was from gutting any other animal. It was a pity that this knight was not afforded the quick, easy dignity of an arrow through the heart, Will thought, and wrenched the knife upwards, splitting the Dragon up the gut from navel to sternum. Next to him, Hannibal gripped their enemy by the hair and pulled his head back, leaning in over his throat.

Will's breath caught, entranced and euphoric as the rush of the fight drained out of him, while Hannibal brought his mouth in and revealed those straight, sharp white teeth. He watched as Hannibal's lips brushed the Dragon's throat, his face already paling, as gentle as a kiss before his teeth sunk down around the delicate cartilage in the front of the neck. When he pulled back, bloody empty hole left behind, Will felt the world spin and his feet fall out from under him.

He collapsed to his knees in front of the corpse of the Great Red Dragon.

The cage was open. Will was free.

All the air rushed from his lungs. The silence stretched between them, the gurgling of the Dragon dissipating quickly into the eerie sleep of death. In the distance, Will could hear the usual din of human activity. Way out here, near the forest at the north end of the field, there was only the sound of ragged, painful breathing shared between two men in terrible shape. Neither of them spoke, staring at each other with mutual admiration and disbelief. Will would not break the silence, was not even sure that he could speak, but he let go of the knife.

Hannibal was the first to move, closing the space between them. His chest was heaving with the exertion of unarmed physical combat, the Dragon's blood covering his face like a grotesque collar. He was still losing blood from the knife-wound in his abdomen, limping slightly on that side as he approached and held out a wet, red hand. The knight waited a moment, teetering on the edge of uncertainty. If he took Hannibal's hand there would be no going back for Will Graham: he was signing his name away to the devil and condemning himself to depravity.

He thought about meeting Hannibal, about the way Will had felt that the noble could see right through him. He remembered the way he had felt when he had bitten that man, driven by some inhuman desire to experience complete freedom and he remembered how gently and lovingly Hannibal had cradled his face when his nose had been broken. How he had spent the night alone with his unavoidable desires. Will thought about the terror, its icy fingers wrapping around his heart, as he saw the Dragon stab Hannibal. The world had felt, for a moment, entirely empty.

His heart jerked in his chest.

Will took Hannibal's hand, wrapping his fingers around his fine, well-bred wrist and pulled himself to his feet. His vision spun again, the world going white as the ringing in his left ear began again. Afraid he was going to fall, Will gripped Hannibal's arm and swayed unsteadily on his feet.

Hannibal grabbed him, pulling him in until the space between them was the smallest it had ever been. He laid his hand on the left side of Will's face as gently as he had two days ago, as though Will was something impossible for him to comprehend. Despite the fact that he had been stabbed, Hannibal looked remarkably well, chuckling softly as he smoothed his thumb along the crest of Will's cheekbone. His body was warm and incredibly solid— beneath the fancy clothes and impeccable posture Hannibal was all muscle. Will just stared at him, unable to do much else, his vision focusing on the soft, cat-like curve of Hannibal's blood covered mouth and the sharp, killing teeth that flashed when he spoke.

"Do you still feel captive, Will?" he asked, pausing to take a careful breath before he uttered the name. It was like he was unsure of how to act now that he got what he wanted, now that his suspicions about Lord Crawford's knight were confirmed. Hannibal was looking at Will with awe, as though he was going to kneel in prayer before him. His thumb still moved in gentle swiping motions across Will's face, his large hand splayed across the small of Will's back, supporting him. He had never felt so adored. So *loved.*

Will was still not certain he was capable of speaking, clearing his throat and coughing up a half-congealed clot of blood. "No," he choked from the left side of his mouth, unable to control half of his face. The confession felt like a great weight had been lifted from him, the way his shoulders felt relieved when his armor came off after a long day on the battlefield. No— he didn't feel captive anymore, he felt free, completely unbound by the moral codes of anyone. Not chivalry's, not the crown's, not God's. Will Graham was on his own.

Hannibal blinked slowly at him, coughing up a disbelieving chuckle. He was standing so closely that Will could feel the puffs of breath against his cheeks, fluttering against the sensitive tissue of his nose and the raw hole in his cheek. He watched as Hannibal's eyes studied his face, less objectively than he had before, and felt his pulse quicken as he noticed Hannibal's gaze focused on his mouth. *Oh God,* Will thought, panic leaping up in his throat as though he had not been staring similarly himself.

He held his breath, heart pounding like a drum in his chest, his eyes going wide. Hannibal, gentle as ever, smoothed his thumb across Will's bottom lip and raised it to his own, licking the blood off of his finger with a perverse flick of his tongue. The Dragon's blood, and Will's on top of it.

Oh, God.

The noble lord Hannibal Lecter leaned in. Will heard him hold his breath, noticed the inhale that didn't come out. He could see all the pores on his cheeks, the fine and translucent stumps of beard growth catching the last light in the evening sky. Will looked at Hannibal's eyelashes, at his dark eyes with their pupils blown. Hannibal waited, held his breath, as though urging Will to make a decision. Asking him to kill was one thing. Will could still back out, still save himself, his reputation, his sanity. He could back away, pull out of the embrace. He could.

I can't— Will realized, and pushed their faces together in a kiss.

Oh.

Hannibal's mouth was firm, his stubble scratching pleasantly against Will's chin, against his upper lip, against his cheeks. It was not like kissing women, who always kissed softly and uncertainly and searched for him to tell them what to do. Hannibal was all strength, all confidence, all restraint as he allowed Will to decide what he was doing. Will separated, just for a second to breathe, and found himself unsatisfied. Kicking himself, the knight went in for another kiss, this time with the confidence of someone who realized his fears were unfounded. Kissing Hannibal was exactly as he imagined. Maybe better.

He tasted like blood— the Dragon's— the taste of the man Will had killed and gutted like a boar at the end of a hunt. And Hannibal, his tongue darting salaciously out against Will's mouth, was tasting the blood still dripping weakly over his teeth from the back of his mouth. It was delicious, hot and metallic and salty, thick as honey and as intoxicating as wine. Kissing Hannibal was unlike anything Will Graham had ever felt before. His body felt like it had been tightened, the kind of sensation that causes the back of the neck to prickle walking alone in the dark. Hannibal was a gentle kisser, unyielding, moving his mouth conservatively and patiently against the confused and crooked half-mouthed kissing of Will Graham.

Will could have kept going like that forever. He wanted to, but the thrill of the fight had abandoned him completely and the damage incurred during the fight came back into effect at once. Will swayed, gripping Hannibal's wrist in one hand and a fistful of his shirt tightly in the other as he pulled back and blinked slowly up at him. His body felt like it was on fire, every nerve standing at attention, searing away until it felt like he was full of blinding, pure white light. As dizziness overtook him, his blood loss, head injuries, and several broken bones sending his body into shock, the knight leaned his head down against Hannibal's chest and groaned.

Beneath his ear came the comforting echo of someone else's strong heartbeat. Hannibal's hand made its way to Will's hair, embracing him, pulling him in closely until their bodies were pressed together at the chest, the hip, the thigh. This was touching in a manner which should have horrified him, or aroused him until he burned to be touched. Perhaps it was the exhaustion, the shock, or maybe it was just relief at being held, but Will felt as though he could fall asleep forever. Hannibal combed his fingers through Will's dirty, bloody, sweat-stiffened curls and held him. Will exhaled at the same time that Hannibal drew in a breath.

"You and I must make a hasty escape from here," Hannibal murmured, scratching his fingernails against Will's scalp. The gesture, unfamiliar and intimate, made him shudder. He had never felt anything like that before: so deeply satisfying, soft, and gentle all at once.

Here it was: Will's chance for freedom. He raised his head, blinking blankly at Hannibal. Everything looked blurry, as though he was waking up from a deep sleep. Will opened his mouth to speak, his voice cracking in his throat. "They'll find us," he rasped, coughing up another ugly clot of blood.

Hannibal was already pulling away from him, separating them, letting in a sudden and terrible cold. He put Will's arm around his shoulders and helped him back to the damaged tree, leaning Will firmly up against it and making sure that he could not fall. He shook his head, brushing a stray curl off of Will's forehead.

"Have some faith, Will," he clucked, the wound on his side still bleeding.

“I’ll die, then. I’ll die.”

“Will.” It was the closest to impatience Hannibal had ever sounded, a sharp and curt sound like a gavel falling against the bench. Will winced, frowning as he fought to organize his thoughts and find a reply. None would come: Hannibal had spoken as though he had omnipotent authority and Will was too exhausted to combat him for it. Not a single word would conjure in his mind fully enough that he could roll it off the edge of his tongue and into existence. Hannibal was walking away now, limping gingerly where he had been stabbed.

It felt like hours before Hannibal returned leading his own horse, the same sleek and regal animal Will had seen in the rain. When he opened his eyes to the sound of approaching footsteps he was relieved to see Hannibal coming at him through the twilight, the sun gone and the western horizon swirling into inky darkness.

“Where will we go?” Will croaked, unaware of how cold his hand was as Hannibal helped him into the saddle, leaping up behind him with all the grace of someone who was not nursing a knife wound.

“As far as we can,” Hannibal murmured. He tapped the horse with his heels and they took off along the eastern edge of the tournament field, lacing their way through narrow farmer’s paths and away from the main road. Hannibal’s horse was smooth and the cold wind on his face was incredibly soothing. Whether it was sleep or unconsciousness, Will Graham’s eyes fluttered closed, his head falling back against Hannibal’s chest.

Will Graham woke to the smell of salty sea air and a headache that indicated his head had been cleaved in two. Bright, mid-morning light shone in through an open latticed window, accompanied by a crisp ocean breeze and the distant sounds of carriage wheels and shouting. Will could hear gulls outside. His senses adjusted slowly, his sight coming back last, and he looked around the room carefully. He was laying in bed, undressed down to his hose, and could feel that a length of linen bandage had been wrapped carefully around his face.

Across the room from him Hannibal had wedged a heavy chair into the corner which allowed a view of both Will and the door, which was locked and barricaded with a large cedar chest. Hannibal was asleep, a thick poultice and a second length of bandage wrapped around his waist. There was color in his cheeks, which Will applauded himself for noticing. He could not help but look at him, at his broad shoulders and thick arms and the patch of grey-brown hair on his chest. He looked so *human* , with his hair untidy and the shadow of a beard caressing his jaw.

Hannibal had saved him.

Throwing his feet over the side of the bed, Will gingerly tested his ability to bear his own weight and crept to the window, judging each floorboard before he stepped on it for a creak.

There was a desk beneath the window littered with evidence of nothing short of a medical miracle: tools Will had never seen before, a chipped porcelain bowl filled with bloody water, soiled washcloths piled in crumpled heaps. He frowned, leaning over it to pull back the curtain and look out at the view.

They must have made it all the way to the coast as the harbor which met him was bustling with activity and ships larger than anything Will had seen before. Men, made into toys by the distance, rushed about like ants. Some of them rolled barrels or loaded cargo onto their vessels. Others scrambled like spiders through the rigging, unfurling sails and tying knots. Fishmongers meandered by with their oxcarts laden with shiny, glorious fish. Dogs barked and children yelled.

The wheel of the world kept turning, whether Will asked it to or not.

“I have a castle on the Continent, we will go there when you are well enough to endure the trip.”

The voice startled Will, who turned suddenly away from the window towards Hannibal. He was looking up from his chair, his expression sleepy but alert. Will thought it was the most frightening Hannibal looked, vulnerable and ordinary and in *love.* The fear, Will realized, came from the fact that he enjoyed it. Hannibal, barely awake, watching over him like a doting wife, whisking him away to some castle in a place he had never been.

Will scoffed. “A castle,” he repeated dryly. He watched as Hannibal sat up and gingerly placed a hand against his side. His face did not change; Hannibal’s level of self control was still awe-inspiring in Will. “It is not me who should rest,” he added somberly, crossing the room. “My face may be ugly, but I am not perilously wounded.”

When he offered Hannibal his hand without thinking, Hannibal willingly accepted it. Will pulled him up and helped him across the room, pulling down the covers to get him into the bed. He had never been much of a caretaker, on occasion unable to look after even himself, but Will found that it came surprisingly easily. He was paying back a favor which had been done unto him more than once. He had no medical skills, not like Hannibal, and did not believe himself to be particularly comforting. Still, he pulled the blankets up and patted them sympathetically.

“Lord Crawford told me you were seen at a church the morning last,” Hannibal said.

“I was,” Will admitted. He stood awkwardly at the bedside.

“Praying?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal waited, his face expectant. He was not going to ask.

Will toyed with the idea of not telling him, of letting the conversation fall into silence there. Perhaps he could wander downstairs— it appeared they were in some kind of traveler’s inn— and find something for Hannibal to eat. He couldn’t imagine eating anything. Speaking was

hard enough as it was; the injury from the dragon had paralyzed the entire right side of his face. His ear heard nothing and his mouth did not move. Even his eye was affected: blinking slightly out of sync with its twin.

“I asked God, should he exist, to deliver unto me the punishment he saw fit for the actions I was about to perform. That I did not regret them enough to beg forgiveness, nor was I interested enough in heaven to pretend that I did.”

He picked at a loose thread on the wool blanket, looking around the room as though it was going to reveal something to Will that he hadn’t noticed the first time. Anything to avoid looking at Hannibal, and to avoid having to take responsibility for the gravity of his admission.

“God has certainly forgiven murderers before,” Hannibal quipped.

Will drew his eyes up, pinning Hannibal beneath a stone-faced expression. He rocked his jaw back and forth and took a step towards the bed. Towards Hannibal. Anxiety shot up through his body with every step he took, twisting his stomach as his chest rose and fell. “I didn’t exclusively mean murder,” he muttered, looking down at Hannibal. A hand reached out, brushed away a lock of silvery hair.

Despite himself, Will shuddered. He could tell that Hannibal was about to speak again from the way that he inhaled, but Will didn’t think he could handle another wise and poetic statement. The itch in the back of his throat, which he had not noticed for days, was clawing away at him. He recalled the urges he had after Hannibal had left him alone in the hall house, the way his mind had run wildly into perversity, and the way his body had followed.

He pressed his finger to Hannibal’s lips and sat down on the edge of the bed perpendicular to his body. “Don’t say anything,” Will breathed. He placed his hand on top of the blanket beside his body, next to Hannibal’s hip. His heart was beating so fast he thought it might break out of his chest and flap madly once or twice about the room before escaping through the window.

Will Graham slid his hand beneath the blanket, felt the furnace heat of Hannibal’s body, pressed his palm down on the hot flesh of his hip. He heard Hannibal’s breath hitch and felt the room spin around him. It wasn’t guilt that made him so terrified; it was inexperience. Will had slept with women before, to mixed reviews, and how different could this really be?

He had never fantasized about women.

He had never killed a man with a woman before, either.

As he turned to look at Hannibal, desire burning in the backs of his clear blue eyes, Will Graham slipped his hand lower beneath the blanket. His face was a mask, unchanging, calm, as he watched Hannibal’s pupils expand and his lips part. Done and undone. They had switched places.

“Hannibal,” Will murmured, smirking when the noble Lord Lecter did not answer him. He felt him shift, rock his hips under the covers, and sensed his body temperature rise.

“Hannibal,” he repeated, posing the question casually as he moved his thumb in a small, distracted circle. “Do you think God exists?”

There was a brief silence, in which Hannibal might have been deciding what to say, or if to say anything, or he might have been gathering himself from the precipice of physical impulse to speak in the first place. Will raised his eyes, watching through his eyelashes at the way Hannibal looked at him. Ecstasy: the divine bliss inflicted upon the devout. Enlightenment: to possess all the knowledge one should ever need and to find peace in it.

“I know so,” Hannibal answered, and confidence swallowed Will like a flood.

Chapter End Notes

All right guys... getting to the end of this. I'm sure you can all see where this is going and what will happen in the next chapter. I will probably write one more after chapter 6, so this fic should conclude in the next couple weeks. I might be starting a new job soon and would like to have it finished before that happens so I don't get too burnt out to post.

Chapter Summary: Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter fight the Great Red Dragon and defeat him. I kept the fight quite similar to the show: Hannibal is stabbed in the abdomen and Will suffers the same injury to the face. The Dragon is eviscerated before the two men share a bloody, nasty, barely-conscious and non-sterile kiss before Hannibal whisks a weak and concussed Will away. Will wakes to find that they are safe at an inn on the sea coast and that Hannibal has tended to both of their injuries. It is announced when they have strength they will be leaving on a ship to Hannibal's castle on the Continent. Will admits to Hannibal that, while in church the morning of the joust, he was praying that God deliver whatever punishment He saw fit for the things Will was going to do. Hannibal tells him that God has forgiven murderers before, to which Will states it was not murder he was concerned about. Putting his hand on Hannibal's hip, beneath the blankets, Will asks Hannibal if he believes God exists while he struggles to allow himself to initiate intimacy. Hannibal, looking at Will with goo-goo heart eyes, replies that he is certain that God does.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> At last, here it is — 4,500 words of dirty, nasty, vaguely religious sex.
> Thank you for your patience, my life got unexpectedly insane and I've been recovering from surgery these past two weeks.
> There should be one chapter more before this is done!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The closest Will Graham ever got to believing in the existence of the divine was in the hours that followed Hannibal's reverent admission, as the gentle mid-morning light gave way to the harsh honesty of the early afternoon. He learned through careful observation, though not with his eyes exclusively but rather with the pads of his fingers and the span of his mouth, about all the glorious and awe-inspiring details of human design. The way Hannibal's throat, Adam's apple bobbing in anticipation, curved deliciously into the broad swell of his thick chest, which in itself shuttered delightfully as Will's two fingers, outstretched in papal benediction, pressed into his body. He wondered distantly, in the throes of physical ecstasy, whether he might have become a sculptor dedicated to this art in some other life.

It had started as Will sat beside the noble and plaintively considered the gnawing desire in the pit of his stomach, apprehension acting as the floodgate feebly holding him back. He had watched, almost waiting for a sign just like it, as a ribbon of golden sun snaked its way through the gauzy curtains and shot across Hannibal's stomach like a spear, illuminating the contours of his Adonis belt as though he was made of something holier than flesh and blood.

Will was not particularly known for his self control, and wondered why he was so insistent on holding himself back now. Regret was not something he had considered at all, not when he had rejected Hannibal's gift armor and not when he had killed the Red Dragon. He rose unsteadily onto his feet, dizziness causing him to sway unsteadily for a moment, using the edge of the bed to support himself. Looking down at Hannibal with an expression half between longing and disgust, unaware he was holding his breath, he pressed one knee down into the mattress next to his hip, falling forward until he caught himself by the splayed hand of his strong arm. Will exhaled as their lips met, chastely kissing Lord Hannibal Lecter for the second time.

Hannibal tasted like salt, grief, and exhaustion. There were things Will noticed this time that he hadn't before: like the flecks of copper in his warm, dark eyes and the translucent skin beneath them. That his eyelashes were long and nearly invisibly pale, that they were spattered with a few grey hairs. His skin was flushed, clinging still to the clamminess of the weak and tired, but his mouth was eager as he pushed up to meet Will's. His sharp teeth, keen as fangs, grazed salaciously across Will's upper lip and fire, hot and hellish, shot down his back like

molten lead. A groan raced out of him and with a sore wince, Will lifted his second leg and balanced himself with one knee on each side of Hannibal's thighs, straddling him.

His fear melted away and was replaced quickly with impatient hunger: a kind of frenzied urgency to fulfill his desires which better suited the insane, and found that he could not keep his hands off of Hannibal at all. The tips of his fingers traced the elegant lines of his collar bones, trailing them curiously through his salt-and-peppered chest hair, running delicately down his ribs until he shivered.

When kissing his mouth was no longer satisfying, Will brushed his lips against Hannibal's cheek, ghosting his mouth across the coarse stubble of his chin. He had a jaw as sharp as a knife edge and the knight, curiously driven by his desire to fuck this man until they lost the sunlight, ran his tongue along it until an almost pathetic whimper met his ear. Will chuckled deep in his chest, feeling his own erection leap into existence. Another stroke of his hand around Hannibal's cock made him repeat that gorgeous, desperate sound, his hips pushing upward until they connected with Will's own throbbing member.

Will gasped at the unexpected touch, breaking his oral exploration of Hannibal's beautiful, graceful neck. He disconnected and left a wet spot, red and already beginning to bruise, to look at him as though for the first time.

Despite his time on the battlefield and intimate familiarity with violence and death, Will Graham had never seen a man so totally undone, left exposed to him with such tender intimacy and totalitarian trust. He was certain, though unsure why, that if he drew a knife now and pressed it into that lovely throat, Hannibal would not move or complain. His loving gaze, euphoric and dilated chestnut, was almost unnerving. Will felt as though he was suddenly bestowed with too much power, and he was growing drunk off of it.

"Hannibal," he murmured, voice rough and hoarse. He dipped his head back down to press his lips against the hollow at the base of Hannibal's neck, feeling the purr-like hummed response vibrating up against his mouth. Hannibal's skin sweet smell, sex drunk and eager, was heady and overwhelming. Will wet his lips with a damp tongue and swallowed the spit gathering excitedly in his mouth. It felt like he was on fire, energy burning so hot under his skin that he feared his hands would sear Hannibal wherever he touched him.

"Christ, Hannibal," Will repeated, awe-struck as he traced the lines of his Adonis belt with his thumbs, following the faint lines of his abdominals with his index fingers as though committing them to memory.

There was no reply, but instead a straining pressure against his body from the other man. Will Graham cast a last, almost forlorn, look at Hannibal's pretty neck before he moved on, aware that his lingering attentions were bordering on the unbearable for them both. His erection chafed against the rough canvas waistband of his wool trousers, leaving behind a small wet spot where the head of his cock begged to be freed. He pressed his fingernails down into Hannibal's hips, gripping him desperately and hungrily, elated at the delicate, shuddering groan that slipped out in response. They left red marks, trails or roads or little rivers cut through the topography of Hannibal's beautiful and elegant body. Each one of them, raised and angry, seemed to shout *I am here where I shouldn't be. Look at me! Dare me to stop.*

Using his thumbs as anchors, and shifting his weight off of his knees, Will brushed his mouth across Hannibal's hip and felt the cords of his muscles tighten beneath the flesh of his thighs. He smoothed his hands down the sides of Hannibal's legs, using his knee and body weight to part them, and kissed the joint where his limb met the trunk of his body.

"Have you ever met a witch, Hannibal?" Will asked, adjusting himself so he was not crushing his painfully stiff cock. He allowed Hannibal a moment, watching the ecstasy defuse from his glassy eyes. Will did not touch him again: he wanted a real, thoughtful answer.

"Several," Hannibal answered at last, his upper lip twitching as he tenderly propped himself up on his elbows, looking down the length of his regal body at the knight who knelt between his legs.

"I've heard—" he paused, careful. Will lowered his voice to a murmur as though he was afraid of eavesdroppers hiding out in the gutters, as if the gulls might overhear and go running to the sheriff. A shadow crossed in front of the window and the comforting sea breeze turned cold. "I've heard there is a ritual they perform when they renounce God."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, winced as a muscle spasm in his side agitated the wound there. " *Osculum infame* ," he replied smoothly, suddenly and wholly composed again. The Latin rolled off of his tongue so delicately Will imagined he could eat the words right out of the air like drippings from a roast. "The kiss of shame." A smirk passed over his mouth, revealing momentarily his sharp and crooked teeth. He looked like a wolf witnessing the lamb stumble, and in response Will Graham's heart leapt wickedly in his chest, fluttering up into his throat until it choked him. "I don't believe you have reason to fear, dear Will, for it often applies only to the devil and his ilk."

Shockingly, Will found Hannibal's sudden smugness unbearable. Only *days* ago, he had believed Hannibal to be none other than the king of Hell. Part of him still believed this to be true, that the perversions and temptations Hannibal had coaxed to the surface of his mind were a result of his hellish magic. Will made a sound—half-growl and half-expletive— and sank his teeth into the tender flesh of Hannibal's inner thigh. Hannibal sucked in a sharp breath and barked something in a foreign language, reflexively cuffing Will in the back of the head. The blow was barely noticeable, Will's wickedness shooting up in him uncontrollably. He had always been insolent.

With a scoff rising up from the base of his throat, he shoved Hannibal down onto the mattress and pulled the flat, broad surface of his tongue over the pink and angry indentations of his teeth, the skin where he had bitten already turning puffy and red. It would bruise; if Will was lucky the spot might be sore for a couple of days. Each step would offer a tender reminder of their devilish rendezvous here— murderers and sodomites, glorious and unashamed. He found himself, through the rashness of his actions, with his face pressed dangerously close to Hannibal's ass.

Fuck him.

Insolence overpowered any fear, apprehension, or embarrassment Will may have felt as he resolved himself to the ritual performance of the formidable *osculum infame* . Hannibal's skin was warm and musky, Will's tongue running from the bedspread to his balls, deliciously wet.

He was salivating like a dog, pressing the pointed pink tip of his tongue against Hannibal's hole until the reluctant muscle gave way to the foreign sensation. He felt Hannibal suck in a breath, a choked gasp, the muscles in his powerful thighs tensing until there was nothing but solid flesh on either side of his ears. Will heard a whimper and lifted his eyes, watching Hannibal for a moment before he ducked back down and sucked his balls into his mouth, releasing them with a loud *pop!*

"*Will—"* Hannibal's voice had dropped down into his chest, lower and gruffer than Will had ever heard it before. It was enchanting, as encouraging as a spur, and the hand that reached down to grab a fistful of dark hair did little to dissuade the knight from his errant quest. Instead, Will only hummed in acknowledgement and dragged his fingernails along the sensitive skin on the back of Hannibal's leg, his appreciative chuckle lost against his hot, swollen taint.

When Will heard another whimper, breathy and heavenly, he stopped his oral ministrations and coyly raised his head, a debaucherous ribbon of spit running from his bottom lip down between Hannibal's legs like mooring.

"Merely proving my loyalty, my lord," Will responded flippantly, and watched with a devilish smile as Hannibal's jaw unhinged in disbelief. For a moment Will wondered if he would strike him, the grip in his hair tightening until his chin was forced up and back, his neck following Hannibal's fist in a futile attempt to relieve the hot, satisfying pressure. He batted his long, dark eyelashes and scraped his teeth over his bottom lip, all his suspicions of Hannibal's undying and apostolic appreciation for him confirmed when he was released with a roll of those gorgeous dark eyes.

"Your tongue deigns to be more dangerous than your sword, Sir Graham," Hannibal remarked, but his voice was warm and shaking slightly, distracted by Will's exploring fingers which worked against the hot flesh of his genitals, casually circling the head of his cock and brushing the warm skin between his thighs. Their lean muscles were tight and straining, Hannibal's long toes curled down into the mattress beneath the rumpled blankets, which had almost all been kicked carelessly to the floor.

"Flattery will not work on me," Will lied imprudently, and pressed a kiss beneath his navel, scraping his teeth down towards Hannibal's thick, heavy cock. A sigh shuttered out above him, curling into a whine as it rushed out of Hannibal's chest.

All of his senses were flooded: his eyes with the tiny details of Hannibal's skin, his mouth with Hannibal's earthy and organic taste, his nose with the heady and overwhelming smell of his sex. Masculine silence, formidable and unsure, filled the room with a heady anticipation as Will sucked on his own fingers, maintaining unwavering eye contact with the noble, and brought them down to Hannibal's glistening hole. One, then the middle beside it, and like Thomas before him with awe, reverence, and adoration Will Graham was assured beyond measure that Hannibal was flesh and blood. He was warm, slick and damp in that exclusively internal way, a rippled shiver fluttering across his stomach as Will bent his fingers at the knuckle, beckoning.

Hannibal moved as though he was going to say something, exhaling only a short breath and a choked sound as Will gazed at him through the dim haze of his dark eyelashes, a smirk

working the sore corner of his mouth. Another curve of his fingers placed in tandem with a delicate kiss on Hannibal's cock, no more than a whispered graze, and his entire body seemed to jump in surprise. Will could feel the coiled seizure of Hannibal's core grip him, the tension bearing down firmly around his second knuckle.

A sheen had gathered over Hannibal's skin, the pleasant early sweat of exertion from hard exercise, and captured the light pouring in through the window until it illuminated and swallowed him. As Will studied him, working his fingers in and out of Hannibal's body like he was loosening a knot, he noticed that the light seemed to change, going golden and heavenly until it appeared as though it was coming up from *inside* Hannibal. It was some kind of celestial, divine mark: God or the Devil. Wasn't Lucifer, the light-bearer, once considered the most beautiful angel?

Yes, Will decided privately, adding his curious tongue back to the mix as he slipped it between his scissoring fingers, exploring the inside of Hannibal's body with it, his foreign and unusual natural taste, listening with a proud flush at the whimpering gasping encouragement in languages he did not recognize.

When Hannibal was loosened enough, his legs parted obscenely and Will prostrated between them, he pulled himself away and upright to unlace his trousers. The cords were tied tightly, his wet fingers struggling with the knots, his aching cock impossibly stiff. Hannibal, impatient or simply sympathetic, propped himself up on his elbow and pushed Will's hands away, pulling him forward by his waistband to undo the laces with his teeth.

His cock jumped free as soon as the laces were loose enough for Hannibal to tug the rough cloth down around his knees, his pupils widening like wells as he leaned forward to take it into his mouth. Will swore, a confidence and punctual *fuck!* , running his hands reverently through Hannibal's glossy, silvery hair and bunching his fingers into fists at the crown of his head.

"*Fuck,* Hannibal," he managed to whimper, watching aghast at the way his elegant cheeks hollowed out, his mind going fuzzy and white at the edges as he felt his tongue swirling delicately around the head of his cock. Will felt a tightness begin to form at the base of his spine. Terrified he was going to come too fast, he wrapped a hand gently around Hannibal's throat and pulled him away, smoothing his thumb across graceful lips obscenely wet with spit and silky, pearlescent precum. Another beam of sunlight, warm and inviting, drifted across Hannibal's face like he had summoned it himself.

Will watched with devout satisfaction as Hannibal's elbow gave way and his torso fell back into the mattress, large hands gripping Will's skinny hips. He thought again of the devil, perhaps thrown from Heaven for being too beautiful and too aware of it. *Yes, he is,* Will agreed, exhaling a dreamy sigh.

It felt as though there were a thousand things to be said, all hanging about them in the air, seen and untouched— Will looked at Hannibal and Hannibal stared back, and it felt like he was being seen for the first time. As though his body was made of glass, stained by expert hands, chipped and shaped and soldered into place until he was not a window but a vision, something more and wholly important to be admired by worshippers and pilgrims for the rest of time.

I am going to fuck him.

A realisation, an affirmation, a declaration, held in the front of his mind.

Will's right leg dropped off the mattress to support him on the floor, grasping Hannibal's hips and pulling him forward until their hot, hard cocks were pushed firmly together. He ground his hips, rolling them forward cautiously, testing to find where his confidence sat. He took a breath and held it, gripping his own cock loosely in his left hand as he lined himself up and pressed his head against Hannibal's hole.

"Ready?" he asked, years of chivalric submission winning out over any sense of brutish sadism Will may have been feeling. At Hannibal's nod, small and breathless, Will exhaled and rocked his hips forward as though he was coaxing his mare from a trot to a canter, entering him a hair's width too quickly. Hannibal muttered something under his breath, his head tipping back, all of his muscles tightening at once, and then relaxed as Will settled into a horseman's rhythm. His hips rolled like the tide, in and up, back and down.

Hannibal felt *good.* Almost better than good, as though the wicked sexual satisfaction had wriggled its way up to stitch together some ugly wound in his chest, his hips bucking forward until his torso was pressed skin-to-skin with Hannibal, burning away like a fire beneath him.

"*Will,"* Hannibal gasped again, his back curving upwards, meeting a seeking mouth, "oh *god,* oh my god, *oh my god.* " The words were uttered breathlessly into the back of Will's throat. He swallowed them hungrily, adding gluttony to his growing list of sins.

Hannibal's language, ordinarily so refined and elegant, had given way to rhapsodic rambling, his worship devoted not to some unseen higher power but to the man in the room with him, the man inside him, the man *taking* him as though Hannibal's body was a communion in and of itself. Will slipped his teeth over Hannibal's sternum, straightened to offer a pair of fingers — a scold's bridle.

"Shh, shh, shh," he tsked, shuddering, his pace disrupted with erotic shock as he watched Hannibal take his fingers into his mouth, cheeks hollowing as he sucked. Will thrust harder— as firmly as he could— and listened with a satisfied smirk at the squeal of the heavy bed frame scraping along the old wooden floor. Hannibal's tongue, eager and ecstatic, swirled around his second knuckles, his face flushed and unmasked, entirely uncomposed.

The knight removed his hand from Hannibal's mouth, watching with rapt attention at the line of thick, back-of-mouth spit that followed them out. He brushed his index finger across Hannibal's bottom lip and muttered, as best as he could, "there will be plenty of time for worship later, my Lord," watching him through lowered eyelashes.

He grasped Hannibal's cock and watched the way his stomach jerked, sucking in nervously as though he wasn't expecting the touch, and rolled his hips forward deeply as he ran his slick fingers from his balls to the sensitive, swollen head, smoothing the silky pre-cum that gathered there in beads around his shaft as he swept his hand back down. Up and down, listening to the fluttering, animal sounds of laboured, focused breathing.

“Oh *fuck,* Hannibal,” Will moaned, feeling that spiraling, white-hot tightness in the small of his back again which indicated, by some infallible biological understanding, an impending climax. He sunk his nails into Hannibal’s thighs, provoked by the hissing gasp that came from it, and climbed up over Hannibal to prop himself up on his forearms, adrenaline washing away any pain his shoulder might have protested against in the throes of sexual frenzy.

His cock angled just right, brushing against a swollen prostate, and his belly, scarred and tight, brushed down against Hannibal’s throbbing cock. Will kept at it, determined and focused, pressing desperate kisses that were mostly teeth against Hannibal’s mouth, sliding his lips clumsily along the rough, stubbled angles of his jaw and the delicate, angelic curves of his neck.

“Will, please, Will—” Hannibal was stuttering, his words slipping away into insane, incoherent murmuring in languages Will could neither understand nor recognize, and then it came like a flood, like the room was filled with light that pushed out all of the air, and his lungs were collapsing in his chest as Hannibal, his muscles tightening and back raising in unordained, unfathomable ecstasy, drew Will into his own orgasm simultaneously. The muscles along his spine rippled and pulled at each other, his stomach clenching, expletives slipping out of him in sacred, profane reverence.

He collapsed down onto Hannibal’s chest, the last throbbing seconds of his erection fading sorely still inside him as Will pressed his ear down and listened to Hannibal’s heartbeat. It raced like a greyhound, like war drums, like distant far off thunder. He had banished himself from Heaven forever and yet, with a sense of euphoric irony that caused a laugh to slip out of him, Will Graham had never felt more religious in his life.

What followed was a long, comfortable silence in which they steadied their heartbeats and their breathing, Hannibal’s skin damp and sweat-salty, the slick warmth of his cum sliding between them as Will, with a tired but fulfilled sigh, rolled off of him at last. He used a scrap bandage to wipe himself off, grunting as he pulled himself upright and tenderly wiped down Hannibal’s chest and belly, biting his lip as he did so. Will was possessed with a quiet sense of shame, as though he had done something wrong, and the pain from his injuries was welling uncomfortably again in the back of his mind.

“Dear Will,” Hannibal murmured, his voice low and rough. “There are angels in heaven still less beautiful than you.” His hand found Will’s wrist, wrapped around it, impossibly warm and torturously soft. Despite himself, the vassal felt a flush creep over his ears and run down his neck. Hannibal coaxed him gently towards him, pulling the fabric from his hand and setting it aside, pressing his lips to Will’s pink knuckles.

He averted his eyes. “Why me?” Will asked at last, the question burning away at him for hours now. What did Will, surly, ungrateful, and callous, have which made him so desirable?

“Who else?” Hannibal replied as though it were obvious, gingerly pulling himself into a seated position and drawing Will up towards him, back to chest, until he could rest his chin over his shoulder.

All Will could feel was that hot gentle breath, pausing on an inhalation before he would speak. He was reminded again of how solid this man was: like a wall against him, a place for him to lean and rest and collect himself. He looked down at their hands, entwined and resting over his stomach. Will could feel the words Hannibal spoke before he heard them, buzzing against the back of his throat.

“There is an old chapel on my castle grounds,” Hannibal was saying, soft and dream-like. They barely registered. *Castle.* Will leaned back into him, overcome with exhaustion, and watched tiredly as his hands swept absent, doting circles across his hips and stomach, “which I cannot recall entering since my childhood. I think it may be better suited to new gods.”

A kiss, pressed behind his ear, and a shiver that followed before Hannibal was stiffly moving them again, separating them. The space between their bodies was filled with an almost unbearable cold and Will, as Hannibal stood and went to collect his clothes, reached out to grab at him. His eyes were bluer than the sea beyond the window, his pupils not quite restored to their baseline, his skin still flushed across his collarbones. The expression he wore was pleading. *Don’t go,* it begged.

“I thought I might summon something to eat, my brave boy,” Hannibal explained gently. The tenderness in his voice was almost intolerable, stinging the backs of Will’s eyes. A stone lodged itself in his throat that he could not swallow away to speak. He nodded, a small relief, and started to redress himself as well. Will thought of that cliff in his mind, where he had found so much comfort for so many years, and discovered he hated the thought of going there now.

He had never felt so thoroughly adored, perhaps because he had never allowed someone to know him quite as well as Hannibal had insisted on learning him. Will, who had viewed others almost always as a mirror, was unsettled by the way Hannibal looked through him like a window. There was nothing inside him that did not feel seen, touched, loved, and worshipped. The way Hannibal addressed him now, as though Will was his wife, felt somehow more obscene than the sex. It thrilled him, already lost to the perversions of romance with this man.

Near the window now, Will listened to Hannibal’s footsteps and commanded himself not chase him around with his eyes. There would be plenty of time, he told himself insistently, to memorise the shape of his body and the feeling of his skin, without looking desperately hungry now. The footsteps approached, so soft they were almost inaudible, and then he felt a warm hand swipe its way from the small of his back to the nape of his neck, massaging his scalp through unruly curls.

Hannibal brushed aside the curtain, smiling his closed-lip smile as he stroked Will’s head, humming when he melted back into the touch. “If only Icarus were so lucky,” he whispered, breath warm and gentle against Will’s ear, “to love Apollo from the safety of an inn on the shore.”

Will turned and was met by lips brushing his cheek, tender and polite. *Loving.*

“Or Gawain,” he replied hesitantly, feeling around for the word’s Hannibal might find most impressive. “To stay in that house in the woods.”

He heard Hannibal chuckle approvingly before the contact broke, satisfaction brimming in him like a cup too full. It might spill over and then he would be kissing him again, and Will didn’t know if he could handle that. Instead, he stayed at the window, looking out over the harbour, and watched the sailors scurry about on the docks as he heard the door close, and nearly silent footsteps rush down the creaky stairs.

The sudden silence was torturous, leaving him alone to turn over the events of that day in his mind, pausing and scrutinizing each of them. A large gull, its grey wings spread wide, drifted across the ocean breeze and squawked coarsely as it coasted out over the sea. Will watched it, followed it out to the horizon where a cloudless blue sky met a smooth blue sea. It was summer and everything was beautiful, and soon he would never have to fight in another tournament again.

Chapter End Notes

I made a lot of quite niche religious references in this chapter and so I thought I might explain them:

- "Benedictine hands" is referencing a papal gesture popular in Catholic iconography: it is holding the hand with the first two fingers extended, with the third, fourth, and thumb folded in over the palm. Think of the "come hither" gesture.
- The Osculum Infame, called the Kiss of Shame, is a motif in early modern witch trials and depictions of witchcraft. It means to kiss the Devil's asshole, signifying a renouncement of God and an allegiance to the Devil. I had to include it because it's the only extant example of ass-eating I know of.
- I compare Will to "Thomas before him", this is in reference to the famous story of Doubting Thomas, one of the apostles of Christ who fingered the side wound after Jesus' resurrection to confirm that he was, indeed, alive.
- A Scold's Bridle was a medieval torture device meant to be used on gossips: it was fastened over the face and featured a piece which sat inside the mouth, including a spike that laid on the tongue. It was meant to prevent the wearer from speaking (or suffering unimaginable pain in doing so) and to humiliate the wearer.

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